

WALKING WITH HIM



J. NEUNER, S.J.

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*A Biblical guide through
thirty days of Spiritual Exercises*

By JOSEF NEUNER, S.J.

xvi + 300 pages

In the past years many efforts have been made to find new ways of giving and making the Spiritual Exercises. The long established tradition of "preached retreats", of conferences with an overstress on moral and spiritual teachings, has given way to "directed retreats" with emphasis on both personal awareness of God's design for our life and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The results of solid biblical studies have been used in these new approaches.

This book, then, is an attempt to make a contribution to these new approaches. It is the result of a great number of thirty-days retreats given mostly to theologians in preparation for their priestly ordination. These were directed retreats following the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. Every day is centered on one specific theme. This background explains both the book's structure, and its orientation.

The book is divided in four parts, corresponding to the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. In every chapter the theme is unfolded by a general exposition, which is followed by "short points for meditation" which are meant for the personal use of the retreatant.

WALKING WITH HIM

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J. NEUNER S. J.

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A Biblical guide through thirty
days of Spiritual Exercises

3rd revised Edition



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FOREWORD

A powerful current of fresh enthusiasm for the Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius of Loyola is one of the characteristics of this age of renewal in which we live. As compared with a generation ago, there is a notable increase in the number and variety of people making the retreat, in their fidelity to the original Ignatian design and, it would seem, in the profit that is derived.

This is due in large measure to the present understanding of the Exercises, in the light of Ignatius' own spiritual experience rather than simply according to the letter of the text. After all, it is he himself who tells us in his autobiography, "that he had not composed the Exercises all at once, but that when he noticed some things in his soul and found them useful, he thought they might also be useful to others, and so he put them in writing."

Looked at in this way—as a painstaking effort to communicate an experience, and not just a piece of religious literature—the Exercises reveal a vision of reality and a dynamic of personal growth that are very much in tune with the mind and heart of the Church in this post-conciliar period of her history. Hence it is that committed Christians today find them admirably suited to meet their actual spiritual needs. But this supposes that there is someone at hand to translate the authentic intuitions of Ignatius into the current idiom and to place them in the context of contemporary life.

Father Josef Neuner is eminently qualified to render precisely such a service, for he has both the vast fund of knowledge and the delicate sensitivity that are required for the task, besides being well practised in the art of teaching. Long before the Second Vatican Council, he had already introduced his students to the theological style that is now associated with that great ecclesial

event; during its sessions he had the opportunity to breathe its spirit and to collaborate in the shaping of its pronouncements; ever since, he has been a zealous promoter of the movement for renewal that it launched, often using the Ignatian retreat as an effective instrument.

In fact, Father Neuner could say of this book, in which he presents the Spiritual Exercises in a biblical perspective, what Ignatius said of the original. It is not a piece of literature but a painstaking effort to communicate an experience—an experience that has matured through his constant concern to share it with others, and particularly with that privileged group of his disciples: the many young men whom he has prepared for priestly ordination.

Those of us who have known and loved Father Neuner these many years will immediately recognize our revered master in these pages, and be thrilled at this fresh encounter. Everything is here, except the eloquent gestures: the solid scholarship enlivened by a contagious enthusiasm for God's marvellous plan of salvation, centred in the person of Christ; the struggle for adequate self-expression; the sense of mission that makes him put his whole heart into his utterances.

But what matters most—what Father Neuner would surely most desire, and indeed Saint Ignatius himself must want—is that in this book an earnest seeker can meet Christ, so as to know him more intimately and thus love him more ardently and follow him more faithfully.

Parmananda Divarkar, S.J.

Foreword to the Third Edition

The structure of the book remains unchanged; it is based on the four weeks of the "Spiritual Exercises" of St. Ignatius. However, apart from a good many of minor changes, two new chapters have been added: II, 8 on *Contemplative Prayer*, and III, 3, *With us, for us*. An explanation of contemplative prayer seems essential not only for the time of the retreat but for the entire life of the retreatant. The chapter replaces chapter II, 8, of earlier editions on *Life according to the Gospel*. Chapter III, 3, *With us, for us* is added to the third week to develop more deeply the saving significance of Jesus' passion as it is to be continued in the Church.

J. Neuner, S.J.
Christmas 1988

INTRODUCTION

The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius are based on his unique mystical experience at Manresa in which he saw the whole of creation in a totally new and comprehensive vision, as it originates from God, as it moves towards its fulfilment in God; Jesus Christ is the centre of this vision. This vision gave orientation to his whole life and work. He still had to grope towards the concrete form of his mission, and the various stages of this search often seemed to be conditioned by arbitrary circumstances which finally brought him to Rome and to founding the Society of Jesus. But in each of these stages the vision of Manresa remained his guiding light. It became also the uniting bond that gave to his first companions a common orientation, and a sense of intimate spiritual communion. Though they were soon scattered over many countries and engaged in very different works—which ranged from teaching children at the roadside to advising heads of kingdoms and working as theologians at the Council of Trent—they remained united by the same spirit which they had imbibed from the Spiritual Exercises.

This powerful influence has astonishingly not diminished over the course of four centuries. In countless documents the Society of Jesus has recognized them as the spiritual basis of Jesuit life and mission. The latest General Congregation, the 33rd, states in a matter-of-fact way that the movement of renewal in the Society of Jesus in the past years “manifests itself especially in the new impetus given to the Spiritual Exercises and to apostolic discernment” (G.C. 33, Decree 1, N. 10).

However, we cannot preserve the treasures of the past unless we discover them anew in our world, for our world. Bernanos wrote: "One cannot preserve the grace of the past unless one receives a new one." Thus it is imperative to re-discover the Spiritual Exercises again in the Church and world of today. How can we avail ourselves today of the treasures contained in the Spiritual Exercises?

Saint Ignatius had a unique capacity to *give* the Spiritual Exercises and so to convey the impact of his vision of Manresa to those who came close to him, many of whom became his companions. He then *wrote* down the guidelines of these Spiritual Exercises in stages. The booklet consists of (1) directions both for the one who gives and the one who makes them. These guidelines are scattered throughout the book; (2) meditations with definite themes, some fully developed, others merely sketched; (3) various rules for different needs and situations.

His work is intended as a practical guide, not as a textbook. Some passages, mostly the central meditations, offer a comprehensive vision of life and the world, the vision which had ever guided Ignatius after Manresa. But even these great meditations are sketched in an austere style. Most parts of the book make dry reading and sometimes seem strangely pedantic. It is difficult to read this text, and the reasons are quite obvious.

Ignatius did not have the genius of self-expression as we find it, for instance, in his great contemporary, St. Teresa of Avila, who was able to spell out her mystical experiences within eight brief weeks (not counting some interruptions); she could write with an inspired flow of language and had no need to cancel or correct what she had written. For Ignatius, however, the *language* remained a barrier to convey his inner experiences.

Further, the *social and cultural milieu* which moulded his thinking and determined the symbolism of his writings is feudal. His ideals are sometimes expressed in terms of courtlife, and motivations are taken from the code of honour of medieval knights. The background of our twentieth century life and the spheres of our mission today have radically changed. We need different symbols, different motivations.

Ignatius naturally had to express his comprehensive vision within the *theological framework* of his time. He understands sacraments and liturgy in terms of scholastic theology. His ideas of Church and hierarchy were inherited from the Middle Ages. His vision of apostolate and mission reflects the era of the sixteenth century, of Renaissance and Reformation. The more we enter into his spiritual world the more we become aware of the inappropriateness of these conceptual tools to express his message effectively today. It is new wine which calls for new wineskins.

Thus the text of the Spiritual Exercises offers a challenging hermeneutical problem if we are to discover its riches and to translate it into contemporary language. Is it possible to distil from this text (obviously, with the help of other sources) the vision which guided Ignatius in his life and mission? Is this vision a meaningful orientation also for later eras, also for our time and world? Shall we be able to express this vision in a manner which is related to our radically changed social, economic, religious world? Will it be possible through a deeper understanding of the Bible, and with the categories of present theological language, authentically to express the Ignatian vision?

In the past years many efforts have been made to find new ways of giving and making the Spiritual Exercises. The longestablished tradition of "preached retreats", of conferences with an overstress on moral and spiritual teachings, has given way to "directed retreats", with emphasis on both personal awareness of God's design for our life and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The results of solid biblical studies have been used in these new approaches.

This book, then, is an attempt to make a contribution to these new approaches. It is the result of a great number of thirty-days-retreats given mostly to theologians in preparation for their priestly ordination. These were directed retreats following the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. Every day is centred on one specific theme. This background explains both the book's *structure*, and its *orientation*.

The book is divided in four parts, corresponding to the four weeks of the Spiritual Exercises. In every chapter the

theme is unfolded by a general exposition, which is followed by "short points for meditation", which are meant for the personal use of the retreatant. Such seems to be the mind of Ignatius. On the one hand he wishes to convey to the retreatant a comprehensive vision of our life and world. At the same time Ignatius does not wish the retreatant to be the mere passive recipient of doctrines and directions; he expects his active involvement. Hence the one who gives the retreat is told to give only a factual exposition of the content of the meditations, and to "add only a short, summary explanation" (n. 2). In this way the active reflection and creativity of the retreatant come into play. Ignatius foresees that this active involvement "produces greater spiritual relish and fruit than if one in giving the Exercises had explained and developed the meaning at great length." Through personal reflection and prayer the retreatant is meant to find the "intimate understanding and relish of the truth that fills and satisfies the soul." (Ibid).

Also the *orientation* and the approach of this book are greatly influenced by the specific situation of young men, who after their theological studies stand on the threshold of their ordination and pastoral and missionary ministry. It seems that this focus on young men who are at a decisive moment of their lives does not necessarily limit the broader usefulness of the book. Four of its main features may be identified here.

The presentation of the meditations is *biblical*. Not only are the themes day by day presented in biblical perspective, but the entire dynamism of the Spiritual Exercises is seen in the perspectives of the Bible, beginning from Exodus and Israel's journey through the desert up to the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. The need of a biblical orientation in all spirituality is demanded by the Council which places God's word at the centre of all Christian life: "Such is the force and power of the Word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigour, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul and a pure and lasting fount of Spiritual life" (n. 21). Obviously no technical exegesis of texts should be expected in this book but it attempts to present and interpret the biblical texts in their authentic sense as it is intended by the

authors and to relate these texts to the actual situations of our life and mission.

The Biblical orientation leads to the key concept of Jesus' Message, the Kingdom of God. A renewal of hearts must bear fruit in the transformation of society. The *social* dimension is an integral part of the biblical message and therefore vital in the Spiritual Exercises.

Though this book does not deal explicitly with *theological* problems, it does incorporate an understanding of revelation, of the person and mission of Jesus Christ, of Church and sacraments, which corresponds to the perspectives of Vatican II and to sound trends of modern theology. This is necessary for young theologians and, in fact, for all modern Christians. As believers we cannot live with a dichotomy between the spiritual values and practices on one side and apparently conflicting theological positions on the other. This appears obvious, but in reality such a dichotomy often exists. This book may in some way contribute to bring the spheres of theological reflection and spiritual praxis closer together.

The presentation of the Spiritual Exercises in this book, especially in the last section, is strongly *ecclesial*. This is a feature which perhaps is not often found in books on the Exercises, though Saint Ignatius had an extraordinary love for the Church and was totally committed to its mission. The renewed self-understanding of the Church in Vatican II as the people of God and as sacrament of Christ's saving presence in our world invites us to see the ecclesial dimension in every sphere of our Christian life.

This book has its *limitations* which readers should keep in mind lest they be disappointed. It is *not* a commentary of the text of Saint Ignatius. Naturally many texts are interpreted but without entering into any controversy. It is simply a positive presentation of the meditations through themes as they are proposed day by day.

Nor does this book deal with the many practical directions and rules of the Ignatian text, though some of these guidelines are referred to here and there. A serious explanation of these directions, however, would imply thorough historical studies and an assessment in the light of modern psychological insights.

How to use this book

This book is meant as a guide for the Spiritual Exercises over a period of thirty days. Each chapter contains (1) the theme of the day in a coherent exposition, (2) short points for meditation and (3) an indication for further readings; (4) some leading questions are added to help the retreatant relate the theme to his/her actual life situation.

From the outset of the retreat the retreatant should firmly decide to remain each day within the theme designated for the day. He will find in it sufficient material for thought and inspiration for prayer. It will be important to enter deeply and personally into each day's theme. It will also be valuable to repeat important meditations in order to deepen their impact. There is no need to cover all the points for meditation or the additional readings as they are indicated for every day. They are given mainly to offer a wider choice but this choice should not lead to superficiality. Saint Ignatius also insists that, while dealing with one topic or subject we should not think of other themes. (cf. Sp. Ex n. 11). To do so would take away concentration and therefore depth. In a thirty days' retreat, a "day of rest" ought to be kept after every Week or at the convenience of the retreatant.

A special way of going through the full Spiritual Exercises, based on the 19th of the guidelines placed at the beginning of the book, has been revived in our time. Ignatius foresees the situation of a person desirous and capable fully to enter into the depth of these exercises, but unable to make himself free for 30 consecutive days. Under such conditions the Spiritual Exercises may be spread over a longer period of several months. Every day the retreatant "should take an hour and a half for the Spiritual Exercises", go through all the themes and meditations, and so experience the full impact of the four weeks. Various forms to realize this method have been devised, both for individuals and for groups. In any such attempt the retreatant pledges himself faithfully day by day to keep the required time free from exterior occupations and to devote it fully to these exercises. This is not easy, yet, if carried out earnestly, it may yield a special benefit: By linking the Exercises to

the daily life and work the spiritual insights of the retreat will be related more directly to actual life situations, and the daily arising questions and problems will be seen in the life of the spirit.

Besides being used for the "long retreat" this book can be of help also for retreats of shorter duration, though a warning must be added. It would be futile to attempt to compress these themes of 30 days into a period of eight days by covering, say, several themes every day. By doing this we would deprive ourselves of that depth-experience to which we are meant to come during Spiritual Exercises. But it may be feasible in a retreat of eight days to select single themes from the four parts of the book. Another option, especially for those who make retreats regularly, is to concentrate on one Week only and to go through its corresponding themes thoroughly.

Acknowledgements

The Spiritual Exercises are the common inheritance of the Society of Jesus. Every attempt to interpret and articulate their meaning grows from the manifold interactions with those who live in the spirit of the Exercises. The author would be happy if many would recognise something of their own aspirations and ideas in the following pages.

The picture on the title page of the two disciples with Jesus on the way to Emmaus is the work of Shri Jyoti Sahi of Bangalore. The original is kept in the chapel of Navjyoti Niketan. It illustrates vividly the theme of the book, "Walking with him" in the Indian scene.

Heartful thanks go to Gujarat Sahitya Prakash of Anand for the keen interest and support in this publication and for bringing it out in the third edition.

ABBREVIATIONS

The book of the *Spiritual Exercises* is quoted by the numbers as they have been accepted in modern editions.

Documents of the *Vatican Council II* are quoted by the Initials of the Latin text:

AG = *Ad Gentes*, Decree on the Church's missionary activity.

CD = *Christus Dominus*, Decree on the pastoral office of bishops in the Church.

DH = *Dignitatis Humanae*, Declaration on religious liberty.

DV = *Dei Verbum*, Dogmatic Constitution on divine revelation.

GS = *Gaudium et Spes*, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world.

LG = *Lumen Gentium*, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

NA = *Nostra Aetate*, Declaration on the relation of the Church to non-Christian religions.

OT = *Optatam Totius*, Decree on the training of priests.

PC = *Perfectae Caritatis*, Decree on the up-to-date renewal of religious life.

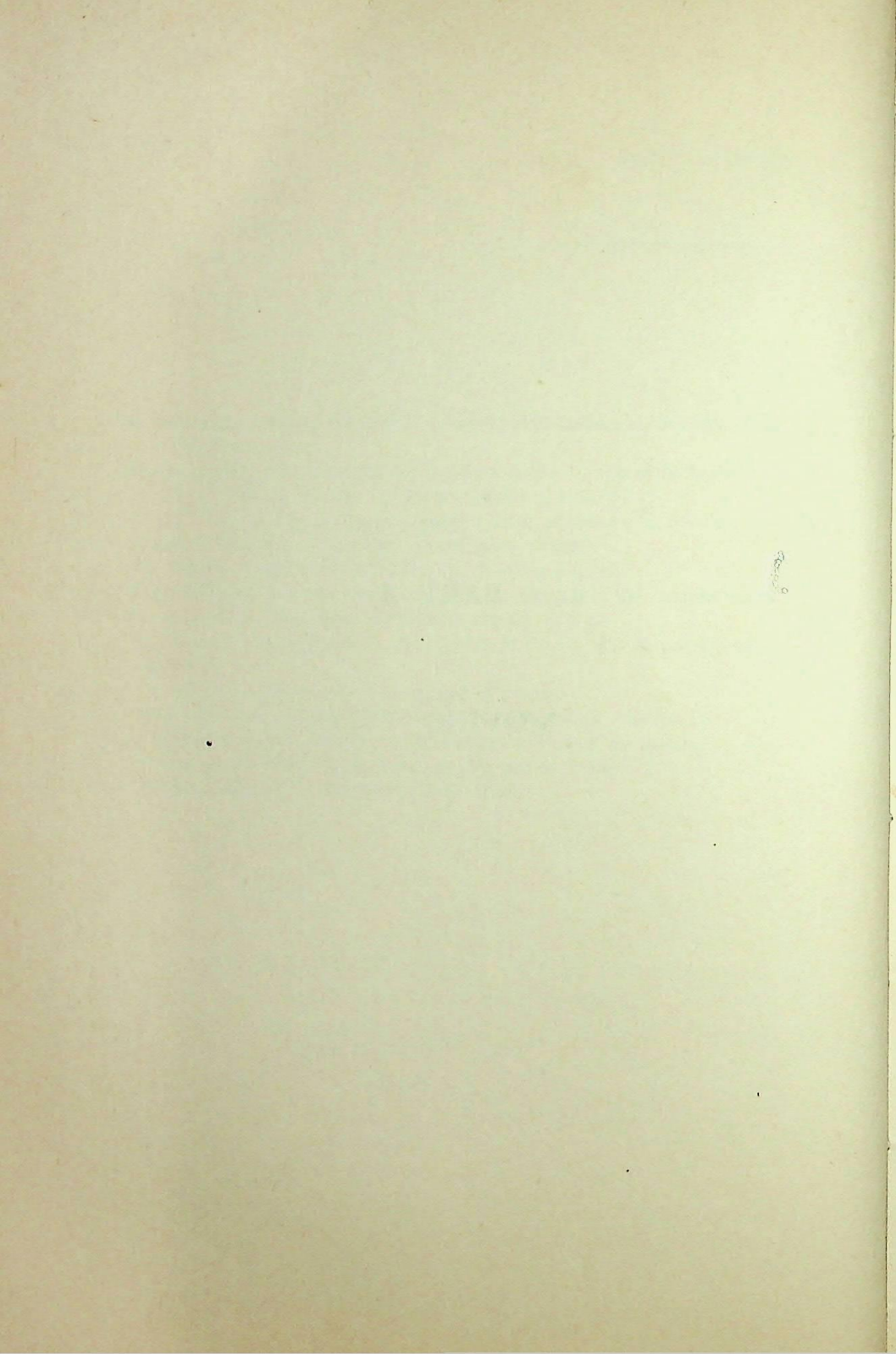
PO = *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Decree on the ministry and life of the priests.

SC = *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Constitution on the sacred liturgy.

UR = *Unitatis Redintegratio*, Decree on Ecumenism.

PART I

MOVING OUT



IN THE DESERT

*"The Spirit immediately drove Jesus into the wilderness.
And he was in the wilderness forty days" (Mk 1,12f).*

The "Spiritual Exercises" of St. Ignatius are not a random sequence of spiritual reflections. They have the definite goal of helping us to find and realize the meaning of our life and so to lead to practical decisions, decisions which affect the personal life and work of the retreatant.

One may ask whether it is meaningful to work out such decisions at a distance from actual reality, in an atmosphere of silence, in the "desert". Should we not be in touch with actual life so that our orientations and options be realistic and workable?

Indeed the retreat is not meant to be an escape from the realities and problems of life. But experience teaches that at times we must withdraw from actual tensions and pressures in order to arrive at balanced decisions, not to be carried away by "inordinate affections" (in Ignatius' terminology) i.e. by spontaneous reactions of our temperament, by natural likings or dislikes or by pressures from outside, subtle or open. Decisions must come from the depth of the heart, the centre of the personality, where we are touched by God. They must mature in silence. Thus we go into the "desert". We have the biblical examples for it—Jesus himself who went into the wilderness for forty days before he embarked on his mission,

4 *Moving Out*

and the wider biblical background of the desert-experience of Israel for forty years. *The decisive battles of God's kingdom are fought in solitude.*

The first day of the retreat should be spent in the awareness of the peculiar situation of the coming month. We call it a "desert" though we may find ourselves in pleasant surroundings and in a peaceful atmosphere with all our material needs fulfilled. Still, it is our desert.

To Withdraw

Desert means, first, to withdraw. This may be the first experience of the retreat: we are away from the usual surroundings in which we feel at home, from the people to whose company we are used, from the routine of work and engagements which fill our normal timetable and calendar. This distance from our ordinary life comes as a relief. We enjoy the freedom from pressures and tensions and from immediate responsibilities. We experience something of the "rest" of which the Bible speaks, God's own rest after the work of creation was completed (Gen 2,1-3). God is more than his work. This rest is meant also for us, it is our Sabbath, to share in God's silent presence as it is promised to his people: "There still remains for God's people a Sabbath rest, for whoever enters God's rest also ceases from his labours as God did from his" (Hebr 4,9f). This is the rest which Jesus offers his disciples: "I will give you rest" (Mt 11,28).

To be alone

But we are not used to this rest. We have our holidays, but they are different. On holidays we exchange the usual occupations with other engagements; we plan journeys, meet friends, read books, enjoy music. In the retreat we are alone. We are not used to being only with ourselves. Soon we discover how much we depend on the many things that keep us busy and the small talk that fills the gaps between our activities. Our daily occupations help us to get more easily over spells of disappointment and frustration. We are carried along, mingle with the activities of others and so are able to

forget ourselves. In the desert we are alone, we are meant to find ourselves. Instinctively we reach for a book or turn on the transistor to escape the desert. It may be the first decision of these days of the retreat to accept the solitude. After a while you may begin to love it.

Among angels and demons

Our exterior occupations and contacts are useful also as selfprotection. We are afraid of loneliness and feel threatened by the darkness that lingers below the surface of our conscience. In the routine of our daily life it cannot come to the surface, but in days of solitude it rises as the mist rises from the valleys and clouds the clear vision of the hills. The deeper movements of our heart, which mostly remain hidden, come into the mind and fill it. These are different and often conflicting powers. There are dark and destructive powers, old hurts come up with new vigour, bitterness against people who have wronged us; there are feelings of emptiness, frustration, rejection. The passions and urges of the body assert themselves. Fantasies of ambition, vanity, self-glory flood the mind, at times under the pious disguise of doing great things for others and for God. But there are also the invitations of grace: God's joy and peace, the call to deep love and surrender, the desire for a truer and richer life. Many of these movements, which usually lie low underground come to life and we have to face them.

In the Bible the desert is the place of temptation and struggle. There are angels and demons, God's loving care and the allurements of Satan. St. Ignatius lays greatest stress on the recognition and discernment of these movements of the heart during the retreat (Sp. Ex. nn. 313-336). It is the time to get into touch with the deeper layers of our mind, the disguised temptations, the silent invitations of God. We must learn to cope with these movements. Silence is needed to listen to the puzzling and disturbing voices that come from the depth of the heart, to discard masks and to see our true face. We renounce shortlived stimulants to spur our activity and search for the springs of true life, which flow from God.

With God

It is the very goal of the Spiritual Exercises to seek and find the will of God (nn. 1,21), over and beyond all the movements of our heart. We pray with confidence: "I have relied on you since I was born" (Ps 22,10). God's Promise is ours: "No longer will you be called forsaken" (Ps 62,4), and "the Lord, our God, will lead you and protect you on every side" (Is 52,12).

Thus we enter the retreat with the firm determination to accept the desert situation, the aloneness, the confrontation with ourselves and all that is in us, the readiness to make a full commitment to God. Ignatius articulates it in two words: *Magnanimity*, i.e. a wide and open mind which is not confined to narrow horizons of small interests, and *generosity*, the readiness to give without conditions and limits (n. 5). We shall resist the temptation to fill the emptiness of these days with trifles or also serious occupations however useful they be in themselves. It will be our time in the desert, searching for God, with Jesus.

With Jesus in the wilderness (Mk 1,12f)

Jesus also needed the desert. He has a unique place in God's plan of salvation, but this eternal plan has to be realized and carried out in Jesus' earthly life. He had to find his mission and to make decisions. The gospels indicate situations that demanded decisive options on the part of Jesus. Most important among them is the account of the forty days in the desert and the temptation (Mt 4,1-13; Lk 4,1-11). It marks the transition from his hidden life to the public ministry.

Jesus' temptation was not a single, isolated event, it lasted through his whole life, till the prayer in the garden, till the cross. But in the account of the desert, the temptation becomes the theme of the biblical narration. It condenses the basic decision which had to be realized in the life-situations as they unfolded. — This is also the situation of the retreatant. Our entire life is a continuous option, but there are situations which are decisive, when basic orientations have to be found and choices to be made. The Spiritual Exercises are such a situation.

So we turn to Jesus: we may start with the peaceful days in Nazareth in rural surroundings, where Jesus grew up and became increasingly aware of his surroundings: of the political humiliation of the nation under the Roman yoke and the growing restlessness of the people; of the social and economic inequalities and injustices; of the sterility of the religious legalism; of the apocalyptic expectations of God's kingdom which would come with power and destroy all earthly empires (cf. Dan 2,44f); of the anxiety of the people who looked out for something new to come. Jesus saw the large crowds that flocked to the Jordan to the Baptizer, to listen to his warning of the impending judgement and to be baptized by him as a sign of repentance.

He too went with the crowds to the Jordan and joined the movement. With the many who waited for a new turn in Israel's history Jesus accepted John's baptism. But John's message was only a preparation. Jesus' vision is different: God's love does not threaten and destroy; God wants a new creation, a world in which God's love conquers the powers of darkness and destruction. Jesus is consumed by his own mission. The Evangelists express it through the narration of the theophany at his baptism, the descent of the Spirit of Jesus and the voice from heaven: "You are my beloved Son, with you I am well pleased" (Mk 1,11). He has to proclaim God's reign, the coming of a new humanity. In this proclamation, and in his entire life, work and preaching he is guided by the Holy Spirit.

With his message of God's reign Jesus would have to face the people, the leaders of the nation, the politicians, the priests, the scholars. He was deeply aware that his message was the fulfilment of all that God had ever told them in the past, through the law and the prophets. All those who really understood the Torah and had listened to the prophets would rejoice in his proclamation. But he realized that it was different from what they practised, and it was a far cry from their actual expectations and dreams. Their dreams were different: either of a revolutionary leader who would fight against the Romans or of a holy worshipper of the law who would lead the people in their old observances. How will

Jesus face them? Will he make compromises and associate himself with their parties? With the supporters of government, or with the revolutionaries? With whom will Jesus side?

Jesus has to find that inner clarity and firmness which characterize his entire life and work. He has to find it in solitude, in a bitter struggle against the temptation to fall in line with any of these dreams. He goes into the desert: "The Spirit immediately drove him into the wilderness" (Mk 1,12). He has to make his free and personal option. Once the inner struggle is over he is ready to meet the people, "in the power of the Spirit Jesus returned to Galilee" (Lk 4,14), and proclaimed the good news of God's reign.

Thus Jesus was led into the desert by the Spirit to face the great issues of his life and mission before he entered into his ministry. (We shall return to the concrete content of Jesus' temptations at a later stage of the Spiritual Exercises). We too enter into the retreat to face the great issues of our life, God's invitations and the evil allurements. In the solitude of the desert we are meant to find the clarity and firmness which we shall need in the turmoil of actual life.

The desert in Israel's history

The forty days of Jesus in the desert are the climax of the ancient biblical tradition of Israel's desert experience. Yahweh led the people from the bondage in Egypt through the desert into their own land. A glance at the map shows that there would have been a shorter route from Egypt to Palestine. It obviously cannot be our purpose to examine the historical reasons why the Israelites took the long route through the wilderness and remained in the desert for forty years. In biblical perspective this is God's own design. The Bible says simply: "God led the people round by the way of the wilderness" (Ex 13,18). He tested his people. They had to experience their dependence on him and live under his immediate protection and providence. He prepared them for the covenant, to become his own people.

This journey will forever be the pattern by which God liberates and leads his own; it is the pattern also of the journey

of this retreat. We get used to our own life and world where we are held by many bonds of duty, of affection or at least of habit, where also our thinking and planning is confined to the accustomed patterns of the society in which we are at home. In the retreat we move out of this world into solitude. God beckons us towards new horizons: "I will bring them up out of that land into a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3,8). The Spiritual Exercises should make us attentive to God's invitation to the real life.

But this journey leads through the desert. Like the Israelites we have to learn to rely on the Lord and not on our resources. We may miss the comforts of the "flesh pots of Egypt" with which we used to console ourselves. At times we too feel tired and thirsty, but the Lord will refresh us in ways beyond expectation, with manna and with waters flowing from dry rocks. In a strange transformation we too may see the desert blossom and fertile rivers flow between barren hills. (cf. Is 41,16).

The Meditations of this day

This day is devoted to the realization of the retreat situation, to find God, to find myself, to find the meaning of my life, to find it in the desert. Our reflections on the desert and the following points for meditation may be helpful. Their purpose, however, is not to make us contemplate Jesus in the wilderness or Israel on its journey through the desert, but to begin to live in our own desert, to be aware of, and accept the situation and challenge of this retreat and to face its struggle. We pray that God be with us as he was with Jesus, as he accompanied the Israelites: "In a pillar of cloud by day to lead them along the way, and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, that they may travel by day and by night" (Ex 13,21).

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The beginning of the New Testament in the desert*

— The New Testament begins in the desert. John the Baptist is "a voice in the wilderness" (Mk 1,3) calling to repentance. As in the ancient times of Exodus

- once more the desert becomes the scene of renewal for the people who receive the baptism of repentance.
- The desert is for them not an escape from the realities of life. John sends them back into their life situations, but renewed: the people, the tax collectors, the soldiers (Lk 3,10-14).
 - Jesus, too, joins the movement of renewal and is baptized (Mk 1,9).
 - Then Jesus is guided by the Spirit into the desert. Before proclaiming his message of God's kingdom, meeting the people, facing hostile adversaries, he is alone.
 - He, too, experiences the loneliness after the sheltered life in Nazareth, the insecurity, the homelessness, the hunger.
 - He is among wild animals. He, too, meets angels and devils (Mk 1,13).
 - Throughout his life Jesus renews the desert experience and retires from the people to lonely places (Mk 1,35, 45; 6,31; Lk 6,12; Jn 6,15).

2. *The birth of God's people in the desert*

- The departure from Egypt remains the great day in Israel's history: "It was a night of watching by the Lord to bring them out of the land of Egypt; so this same night is a night of watching kept for the Lord by all the people of Israel throughout the generations" (Ex 12,42).
- When they were without shelter against their enemies they complained; "Were there no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness?" (Ex 14,11). But Yahweh delivers them and drowns the army of Pharaoh: "On that day the Lord saved the people of Israel from the Egyptians" (Ex 14,30).
- They suffer thirst, but God makes bitter waters sweet (Ex 15,22-25) and gives them water from the rock (Ex 17, 3-7).

- They are hungry and God gives them food: “At twilight you shall eat flesh, and in the morning you shall be filled with bread” (Ex 16, 2-15).
- God makes the covenant with his people: “If you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples; for all the earth is mine, and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (Ex 19,5f).
- They are in God’s singular care: “He found Israel in a desert land and in the howling waste of the wilderness; he encircled him, he cared for him, he kept him as the apple of his eye. Like an eagle... that flutters over his young... bearing them on his pinions, the Lord did lead him” (Deut 32,10f).
- But they still have to cross the desert: “And we set out from Horeb and went through all that great and terrible wilderness” (Deut 1,19).

3. *Israel’s desert memories: The unique time of grace*

- Throughout the centuries Israel kept nostalgic memories of the desert. In the desert it was born as God’s people, it will always find renewal by returning to the desert.
- “Once more God will send us his Spirit. The waste land will become fertile...” (Is 32,15). “The desert will rejoice, and flowers will blossom in the wilderness...” (Is 35,1-10. cf. Is 41,17-20)
- Hosea sees Israel’s corruption as the consequence of the comfort they found in Canaan. They began to worship Baal, the god of fertility and prosperity, therefore Yahweh will punish Israel (Hos 2,2-13). But then he will lead her into the desert again: “I will allure her and bring her into the wilderness and speak tenderly to her... And I will betroth you to me for ever” (Hos 2,14-23).
- Read the touching story of the Rechabites recorded by Jeremiah: They came to Jerusalem as refugees

12 Moving Out

from the Assyrian invasion and there tell the story of their traditions. They had kept the life style of the desert literally. They refused to drink wine and to enjoy the comforts of a settled life (Jer 35, mostly vv 6-11).

QUESTIONS:

N.B. These questions should be answered first personally; it will be useful to formulate the answers in writing. Where there is a group it may be helpful to share the answers in common.

1. Why did I decide to make this retreat? What do I expect of it?
2. How do I intend to face the solitude of these days?

FOR REFLECTION

"The desert does not mean the absence of men, it means the presence of God."

"The richness of a novitiate in the Sahara is undoubtedly the solitude, and the joy of solitude, silence: the true silence that penetrates everything, fills every being, which speaks with wonderful, new power to the soul, a power of which distracted people know nothing. There you live in silence, you learn it in stages: Silence of the Church, the cell, the work, the interior; silence of the soul, silence of God".

CARLO CARRETTO

ENCOUNTERING GOD

*"O God, you are my God, for you I long,
for you my soul is thirsting" (Ps 63).*

Waiting for God: this is the meaning of the Spiritual Exercises, of the entire Christian life. From childhood we have heard about God, at home, in school, and mostly in the Church. We also speak about him in daily life; for many it is part of their profession to teach about him. We also pray to God with solemn words in the liturgy and also in personal prayer. Priests and religious are called men and women of God. There are others with no religious education, or those who have been estranged from God. Still, the quest for him, the ultimate goal of our life, arises from the depth of the heart with irresistible power.

But all have to face the painful question: What do we really know about God? or, more correctly: we may know much about him, but do we really know him, find him, realize his presence and power? Who could ever claim with assurance that he has found him? There is a ring of deep sadness in John's gospel when he sums up the search and longing of endless generations, of men and women in their quest for God: "No one has ever seen God" (Jn 1, 18).

The Search

The quest for God in our time has become ever more difficult. We are affected by the climate of our secular culture.

People of our time have no real place for God in their world, they don't need him any more. They have found explanations for the universe, for nature, for human history and society. Natural sciences, sociology and psychology have replaced philosophy and theology. In former times we needed God because we knew little about the mechanisms of life, the working of the human mind and the laws that govern human society. God had to fill the gaps of our knowledge. Today more and more phenomena are explained by natural causes. The margin of unexplained phenomena shrinks daily, and the success of our scientific approach gives us the confidence that also the remaining puzzles will one day be resolved. No place seems to remain for God, he looks like a relic of the past.

Thus in our modern thinking no longer God but man has become central. The Vatican Council admits: "Believers and unbelievers agree almost unanimously that all things on earth should be ordained to man as to their centre and summit" (G.S. n. 12). Religion has lost its central place in modern society. Atheism has established itself with massive power not only in individuals but in large sections of human society. For others religion has become marginal, a social glamour added to important dates in their calendar without a major impact on actual life.

Believers too are affected by this climate of the modern world, also priests and religious. We are absorbed in secular affairs, drowned in an abundance of involvements and occupations, flooded by modern mass media. People who are deeply committed to their vocation often tend to orientate their life and work towards "practical" tasks like social problems. They know they are right in doing so — but where is God? Many accept the absence of God as something inevitable. It seems not so difficult because there are so many things to do and to care for. They may continue their prayers and they may even teach about God, but there is an emptiness in them, and their words have no longer the ring of truth and life.

We cannot resign ourselves to God's absence. In the depth of the heart remains the longing for the living God. This desire also is a sign of our times. The more we know

about our world, control its hidden powers and fathom the depth of the human mind, the more we need God in whom all is contained and fulfilled. We need God more than the people of the past because our life has become richer and our world larger. But we need the *living* God: we are tired of words and formulas which have been used through centuries and have become like vessels, precious and venerable, but empty. What the mystics meant when they spoke about the ineffable mystery of God must become true again in our heart, in our world, for us.

Words and doctrines are not enough. Everywhere people begin to search for an *experience of God*, for the personal awareness of his presence: "Show us your face, O Lord". This is the prayer not only of the Psalms, but the quest of the entire spiritual tradition of India. Conceptual knowledge is of little use, it may even turn us away from God. We need the personal encounter. Only God can give it. But a warning must be added to the search for the awareness of God. What are you really looking for? For God? Or, for the experience of God? If you wait for God you will have to empty your whole being so that he takes possession of your life. This is a radical demand, the Saints knew it. John of the Cross taught us that we have to go through the night of all our senses, of memory, intellect, affection and will, so that God alone takes possession of them all and fills them. If we speak of the experience of God we are in danger of seeking rather the fulfilment and enrichment of ourselves than God, we are bound to fail, because we have made ourselves the centre of our concern, and make use of God for our own growth. It is an insult against God. What would you tell a man who comes to you with the wish to experience a friendship? He would in other words, make use of you for the fulfilment of his emotional needs. You would probably throw him out. It is entirely different if someone comes to you and asks you to be his friend; he reaches out to you and in doing so he surely will experience true friendship. So it is with our encounter with God: seek him with your heart, open yourself to him, allow him to take possession of your whole being and you will experience God.

We encounter God mostly in prayer. There are many

ways to deepen and enrich our prayer life and we may use them as they are helpful to each one. But one more warning may be added. There are people who read many books on prayer, attend seminars, get initiated into Indian ways of meditation or into Zen practices, and still they fail. All these approaches may be useful, but there is no absolute recipe. Each one has to find his and her own way in a humble search and in faithful perseverance. Butterflies taste from every blossom and rest on none; we pray not to find God's sweetness but to find *God* — and to give ourselves to him.

The meditations of this day are meant to help us in our search for God. We contemplate the great figures of the Old Testament, and Jesus himself in their encounter with God. We should, however, find in them ourselves, in our reaching out to the divine mystery, to the living God, the desire to open our life to him.

Moses' encounter with God and his mission

Exodus is a religious epic which narrates historical data in the religious context, in which they were experienced by Israel. It is the account of the birth of Israel as a nation. The lifespring of this beginning is God who encounters Moses and singles him out for his mission. This encounter, for which there are no words, is presented in powerful symbols that have kept their meaning through the ages and speak also to us in our search for God.

So we return to the desert, to Moses who encounters God in the burning bush (Ex 3,1-12). It is a unique personal experience, yet it concerns the whole people. It is the starting point of his mission. This is important also in these Spiritual Exercises. Our search for God is not merely the desire for a personal spiritual fulfilment. We can never expect to find God and our true life in isolation, apart from the world in which we live and for which we bear responsibilities. In this retreat the personal search for God is at the same time the search for our true place in the church, in society, in the world.

Moses encounters God at the lowest point of his life. The second chapter of Exodus tells us about the special providence

that watched over his childhood. When as an infant he was doomed to die, he was found by Pharaoh's daughter and educated at the royal court. In spite of his privileged position, Moses remained loyal to his people and raised his hand against the Egyptians who exploited Israel. He tried to arouse them to resistance but they did not want it. Disowned by his own people he fled into the desert, a man of shattered dreams, resigned to his helplessness. So the account begins: "When he was feeding the sheep of his father-in-law...."

Who is God?

Moses sees the burning bush. From ancient times fire is the symbol of God with its consuming power, its elusive form, its force beyond control. This fire seems different: it does not destroy or consume, it blazes through the thorny branches but nothing is destroyed, or seems to change. This is the mystery of God that Moses—that all believers through the ages—have to learn: *God is power*, present, all pervading, but nothing is destroyed, nothing seems to change.

The unbeliever will ridicule you when you speak of God. "Show me his deeds; where can you see a change, his interference in our world? Have we not learned the laws according to which nature, life, also human history and society develop? Nowhere can you find God!" The believer has no simple answer to these questions, but he knows that God is here. Nothing seems to change, yet everything is different. Moses will be a new man, Israel's history begins. But you need eyes of faith to be aware of God's power and presence.

"Take off your shoes"

The natural response to a mysterious phenomenon is to come closer and to explore it: "I will see why the bush is not burnt." It is man's right and duty to explore earthly realities with his ingenuity. But God cannot be explored. Coming to God means a personal encounter. God calls Moses by name: "Moses, Moses"—so he calls also me. My name is my concrete existence, all that I am, all that God wants me to be. If God calls my name, the only answer can be, with Moses: "Here I am". In God's presence my real

life begins, my mission. It is taken up by God, it is no longer mine.

With Moses I must accept my life and destiny in adoration: "Take off your shoes from your feet for the place on which you are standing is holy ground". Why do we wear shoes? To keep our feet clean, to protect ourselves against stones. Shoes make us stronger to climb mountains and swifter in sports. Shoes enhance the appearance, they can even become a status symbol. In God's presence we take off the shoes. There is no pretence or status, we are bare-foot with nothing to protect us. We encounter God as we are: "Here I am".

The living God

Yahweh calls himself "the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", God as he was remembered in the ancient memories of the people. Is this God still alive? He now speaks to Moses. It is different to hear *about* God than to hear *him*, to encounter *him*. We too know the God of bible history which we learnt as children, the God of classrooms and books, also of sermons. Has he ever touched me, spoken to me? Was I ever in his presence? If in faith I come into God's presence, I also may do like Moses: "And Moses hid his face and he was afraid to look at God."

God lives, and he is concerned with his people: This is no longer history of the past but actual presence 'Moses' own situation, the situation of his people: "I have seen the affliction of my people...I have heard their cry...I know their sufferings...I have come down to deliver them, to bring them out of that land to a good, broad land flowing with milk and honey." God's people are not abandoned. God lives and cares. What seemed a situation of desolation and despair is now assured in God's promise. God is alive, he can make come true what proved beyond human power, the liberation of his people.

"I will be with you"

What follows is bewildering. If Yahweh is about to save Israel why does he send Moses? This is the way God brings

about salvation, through human agents: "Now I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring forth my people". Moses objects: "Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh and bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" He had tried and failed. God's only answer is the assurance of his presence: "I will be with you."

God works through us. His deeds of salvation are, and for ever remain, his own work, but they are, and forever will be, our own responsibility. There is no division between God's part and our contribution, it is all his, it is all ours. Exodus is God's great deed for his people and through all the following centuries Israel sings God's praise for it. Yet Moses has to carry it through in forty years of struggle, anxiety and often frustration. He receives no tangible help from Yahweh, no resources, no army, only the assurance of his presence: "I will be with you." Nothing has changed, yet everything is different. Such will be also our encounter with God.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Moses encounters God*

Go through the above reflections. In the meditation on Moses and the burning bush we recognise our own encounter with God in this retreat, in faith. It should not be a meditation on Moses but an initiation into our own coming into God's presence, barefoot, allowing our life to be filled with his presence, power and love. Also my world will apparently be the same after the retreat, nothing seemingly will be changed, but God will be with me.

2. *How young Samuel found God* (1 Sam 3,1-18).

This is the beautiful story of the boy Samuel's first encounter with the living God. He naturally knew about God and shared in the prayers in the temple, just as we know about God from childhood through parents and priests; he faithfully carried out his duties in the temple, but knew nothing of the living God.

— "The word of the Lord was rare in those days":

the decadence in Israel's religion under Heli is the background of the story (cf. 1 Sam 2,12-26).

- "Samuel was ministering to the Lord": he is the faithful boy who, however, is still ignorant of the living God.
- "He was lying down in his own place": Be present on that peaceful evening in the temple, the last evening of the sheltered life of the boy. From now on God will take hold of his life.
- "The Lord called: Samuel, Samuel": God calls each one of us by name.
- "Here I am": The boy does not know to whom he really speaks, He runs to Heli because "he did not yet know the Lord". Many of our prayers may be like this.
- "Speak Lord, your servant listens": This is Samuel's first real prayer which marks the beginning of his life as a prophet. It is the prayer of this whole retreat.
- "Then the Lord spoke to Samuel..." a message of punishment for Heli, for Israel. Their sin will not be expiated by sacrifices, on which they relied, only by a genuine return to God.
- "Samuel was afraid to tell the vision to Heli": how can he change his role of the dutiful servant boy to that of the prophet?
- "But Heli called Samuel": It is Heli's greatness that he desires to know God's message, and "Samuel told him everything." "It is the Lord, let him do what seems good to him". Heli surrenders himself to God who spoke through Samuel. The priest recognizes the prophet, and he bows before God.

This is the beginning of Samuel's mission as a prophet. Again Samuel's encounter with the living God becomes a turning point in Israel's history.

3. *Jesus enters his mission* (Mk 1,9-11).

Also the beginning of Jesus' mission is marked by

the evangelists with a theophany, a manifestation of the living God. Heaven opens, the Spirit descends, the Father acknowledges Jesus as the beloved Son. Jesus carries out his mission in the humble style of a wandering rabbi, yet it has dimensions which are expressed in the theophany of its beginning, and will be fully recognized only after the resurrection.

- “Jesus came from Nazareth...and was baptized”: he begins his mission by joining the movement of John the Baptizer and identifying himself with the people who in repentance search for a new beginning.
- “He saw heaven opened”: His mission is not limited to earthly horizons, to social changes. It has its origin in God, he proclaims God’s reign on earth, the beginning of the new creation.
- “The Spirit descended upon him like a dove”: in his preaching and works Jesus will be guided by God’s Spirit only. He takes him into the desert, leads him back to Galilee, inspires his message to the poor, gives him power against demons, sin, death.
- “You are my beloved Son, in you I am well pleased”: Jesus not only preaches, but his person, his life, work, struggle, his rejection and death and his resurrection are God’s revelation: In him God reveals himself as the God of saving love. In him God tells us what we are meant to be. Jesus’ life and mission are embraced by his Father’s power and love. He is the beginning of a new humanity which is transformed into God’s own people.
- “You too will see heaven open” (Jn 1,51): this is Jesus’ promise to the disciples. They are called to share in Jesus’ life, mission, glory.

I pray that in my retreat, and every day of my life, heaven be opened; that I learn to live beyond the smallness of daily life, guided by Jesus’ Spirit, included in Jesus’ sonship, sharing in his obedience and in the assurance of the Father’s love.

FURTHER READINGS: (They too may be used for meditation)

- Ps 8, psalm of God's glory and human dignity.
- Ps 63, longing for God.
- Ps 95, an invitation to come into God's presence.
- Wis 9, 1-14, a prayer for true wisdom.
- Eph 1, 1-14; Col 1, 9-14, we are chosen by God from eternity.

QUESTIONS:

1. How did I encounter God in my life? Was I ever personally aware of his power, guidance and love?
2. What can I do to enrich and deepen my prayer life?

FOR REFLECTION:

"Thou hast made me endless, such is thy pleasure. This frail vessel thou emptiest again and again, and fillest it ever with fresh life. . . Thy infinite gift comes to me only on these very small hands of mine. Ages pass, and still thou pourest, and still there is room to fill." (TAGORE, *Gitanjali*.)

THE STARTING POINT

The desert is only the passage way to real life. We must encounter God and respond to his invitation in actual life situations. Thus it will be helpful right from the beginning of the retreat to take stock of the world in which we live, its demands and its opportunities. This world is different for each retreatant. However, in the following reflections an outline is given of the three main states in the life of the Church: The lay-person, the priest and the religious. It may serve as a frame work for the more personal and concrete reflections of the retreatant.

A. ENCOUNTERING GOD AS LAY-PERSONS

Lay-persons have often been described in negative terms, as Christians who are neither priests nor religious. We ought to understand the place of lay-persons in the church and world not in comparison with special ecclesiastical offices, nor with the religious state of life, but on its own merits: Lay-people are the believers who live their Christian life and mission in the concrete situations of secular society. Jesus' message is addressed not to special groups but quite simply to the world; lay-people have to realize the meaning of this message in the actual situations of daily life and to live it in their social and professional surroundings.

Jesus, a layman

In his Jewish community Jesus was simply a lay-person. He did in no way belong to the priestly class which was made

up of certain families with particular functions in the temple. Nor did Jesus ever join any of the exclusive religious groups of his time like the monks of Qumran at the shores of the Dead Sea, secluded from profane life and living as a community in an ascetical life style. Jesus grew up as a simple village boy in an unknown hamlet of the backward countryside of Galilee. Later he was a wandering teacher who proclaimed his message without any institutional sanction or support, merely on the strength of his prophetic mission. His only support was his Father in heaven.

As a lay-person Jesus felt at home with the people. He joined their joyous feasts (cf. Jn 2,1-12); he was close to the poor, but he moved also among the higher social rank and smiled about the social games that were played among them (cf. Lk 14,7-14). He was aware of the sufferings of the people, the oppression through the Romans, the arbitrary tax system, the helplessness of people in their family problems when a lonely widow loses her only son or a distressed father sees his younger boy walking away into the treacherous city. He also was keenly aware of the general lack of concern for the common people. In spite of good laws and established religious structures in temple and synagogue, he felt the people were like sheep without a shepherd (cf. Mt 9,36). Jesus spoke the language of the people; he did not give elaborate lectures but told them stories which everybody could understand.

Jesus died as a lay person, one may even say because he was a lay-person. He had no academic sanction for his teaching, no official recognition from the religious leaders. How could a simple lay-person claim to know and to interpret the Torah? How could he, with a whip in his hand, drive the merchants out of the temple without a permit of the temple police, who were responsible for the order in the holy place? And still Jesus had power, an irresistible power which came all from within, and so the authorities were afraid of him. He was a threat to their official position. Had not God established them in their authority? Lay people, they thought, should be silent. With the entire hierarchy against him, without any official support, Jesus stood no chance. He was condemned and executed.

Jesus' message for lay-people

In this closeness to the people Jesus effectively proclaimed his message of "the reign of God", of a new human society, where God and his love rule supreme. Jesus was not concerned with reforms in the temple nor with the elaborate regulations of the law. His spirituality was secular. He called for a true conversion of hearts: from these renewed hearts a new society will be born, based not on power and exploitation but on mutual acceptance and love. The world will be renewed not by legislation and institutions, however necessary they are, but by people in the world who know that God is Father of all, and wants that justice and love be the bonds by which the people are united as brothers and sisters to build true community. It is for lay-people in their actual life situations to realize this message of Jesus in the world, also in our world.

The laity in the Church

For centuries the Church has been ruled too exclusively by clergy and hierarchy. The laity was reduced to passivity, and in particular women were kept in a subordinate position. The ideals of Christian holiness and perfection were derived from monasticism, and Christians who strived for holiness were expected to come as close as possible to the standard of monks, keeping regular hours of prayer and imitating their ascetical life-style. No genuine lay spirituality could develop under these conditions.

In the second Vatican Council, the Church has seen herself in new perspectives. She embodies Jesus' mission and message for all people. The Church is the "sacrament of salvation" for the world, she is the visible sign and instrument through which Jesus' saving mission for us is to be continued. Thus the Christian community has to make Jesus' message, the vision of God's kingdom and a new society of men real and relevant for the modern world. In their life and work people of our time must realize that our life has meaning and hope, and our society can be renewed. This obviously is the task of the laity, of men and women who have their place in the midst of civic society and are involved in its needs, problems and aspirations. Thus the Constitution on the

Church tells lay-people that their Christian vocation consists not in withdrawal from secular affairs, rather "by reason of their special vocation it belongs to the laity to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God's will....Being led by the spirit of the Gospel, they may contribute to the sanctification of the world as from within like leaven" (L.G. n. 31).

Thus the kingdom of God as it was proclaimed and lived by Jesus must be lived by the laity in today's world. It is based on the unique dignity which we have from God, before whom we all are brothers and sisters in a new relationship of justice, equal basic rights, mutual acceptance, respect and love. Through Jesus the wounds of division and hatred are healed and a new community emerges.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. Living stones in God's temple

Peter writes to Christians who are scattered, overawed by the superior culture of their pagan surroundings, often despised. How can they live their Christian life in confidence? How will they be able to share it with their surrounding world? He shows them their new identity in Christ:

— "Come to him, that living stone, rejected by men, but in God's sight chosen and precious": Peter has before his mind the Jewish temple of Jeruslaem, powerfully built of stones. The Christian community also is a temple, firmly built, but not of material stones but a community of believers with Jesus, the Risen Lord, as their cornerstone, i.e. the centre which gives community firmness and confidence, in whose life and love all share. Jesus too was rejected because his message of God's reign conflicted with the narrow, selfish, self-righteous world in which he lived. But God raised him and made him the corner-stone, the lifespring of the community of believers.

— "Like living stones, be yourselves built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood": built on Jesus

Christ, the corner-stone, united to him and sharing in his life, the community of Christians continues Jesus' presence in the world and fulfils his mission through the ages. Like him they have no sheltered security but have to live the gospel in a world of totally different values. Like him they also will realize conflict and experience rejection. But they are built into a house and become members of the community, which has the promise of fulfilment.

- “To offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ”: sacrifice means a total self-gift to God. Jesus offered no ritual sacrifices as they were performed in the temple; they were symbols and substitutes for our true self-gift to God. But his entire life, his very being, was a self-gift to his Father. So also the faithful, united to Jesus Christ, belong to God with their whole being: “Present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God” (Rom 12, 1). In their life and work they have to live out their consecration to God in baptism.
- “That you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light”: through a life that is consecrated to God they will also share in Jesus' mission and proclaim the good news, not so much in words as through their life. In the Christian lay-person the richness and joy of the Christian vocation must be visible, a life no longer shrouded in darkness, empty and without hope, but lived in God's love in genuine brotherhood, in the midst of our world,

2. *I am baptized*

I have been born into my human life, into my family and social world. In baptism I have been reborn, not to add another life to my human existence but to live this life of mine in God, in its depth and richness, in its full responsibility. In this meditation I reflect on the ritual of baptism and its significance.

- The blessing of the water: "Lord, make holy this water which you have created so that all those you have chosen may be born again by the power of the Holy Spirit and may take their place among your holy people." Be aware of the natural symbolism of water: it cleanses, refreshes, all life is born from it; it becomes the sign of your own life in God.
- The basic option, renouncing the powers of darkness and destruction, and embracing God's love and life: "Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God's children?" Add your own concrete areas of conflict, which you reject—casteism, bribery, corruption, etc. "Do you believe in God the Father Almighty, in Jesus Christ his only Son and in the Holy Spirit?"
- The baptismal consecration: I am baptised in the name of the Father who holds me in his power and love; and of the Son through whom I share in God's sonship, who is Way, Truth and Life to me; and of the Holy Spirit who dwells in me and is the assurance of eternal life.
- The white garment is given as sign of Christian dignity: May we bring this dignity unstained into the everlasting life of heaven. "Live a life worthy of your calling to which you have been called" (Eph 4,1)
- The lighted candle; "Receive the light of Christ". Jesus, the light shining in darkness, tells his disciples: "You are the light of the world" (Mt 5,14).
- *Epheta*: The priest touches our ear and mouth: "The Lord Jesus made the deaf hear and the dumb speak. May he touch your ears to receive his word, and your mouth to proclaim his faith to the praise and glory of God the Father."

3. *My world*

In your meditation return to the various spheres of your life: family, neighbourhood, friends, the professional world, and ask yourself these questions:

- What is my place in this sphere?
- What are its needs, problems, aspirations? Am I alive to them?
- How can this world of mine be oriented in the spirit of Jesus Christ?

FURTHER READINGS:

- Jn 17, 9-19; In the world, not of the world.
- Council, Constitution on the Church, n. 10; 30-38: The Laity in the Church.
- Mission Decree n. 21.

ENCOUNTERING GOD AS PRIESTS

More than other faithful, the priests have been shaken by a crisis of identity in the wake of the Council. Their traditional image as the sole responsible leaders of the community was questioned: the entire people of God shares in Jesus' priesthood and is entrusted with his mission. Further, in the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World this mission is spelled out as responsibility for the world to help in the solution of the problems of modern society: safeguarding human rights, proper social and economic structures, peace between nations. Where then is the role of the priest? Should he shed his dignity and walk along with the pilgrim people in search of solutions in the pressing problems of our world? Where is the meaning of his preaching, the celebration of the Eucharist and the administration of sacraments?

It will be necessary for the priest at the beginning of his retreat to reflect on some of the perspectives of his priestly ministry and life.

Brother among brothers

Priests are first of all Christians, members of the community of the believers and sharing in the common vocation and mission of Jesus' followers: "In common with all who have been reborn in the font of baptism, priests are brothers among brothers and members of the same body of Christ which all are commanded to build up" (P.O. n. 9). Lay-people

should look up to priests not as men in a privileged position but "have as brothers those in the sacred ministry who by teaching, sanctifying and ruling with the authority of Christ so nourish the family of God that the new commandment of love may be fulfilled by all". St. Augustine's words are then quoted: "I am frightened by what I am to you, but I am consoled by what I am with you. To you I am a bishop, with you I am a Christian; the first is an office, the second is grace; the first is danger, the second salvation" (L.G. n. 32).

Sharing in Jesus' mission

However, the brotherly relation of priests and faithful should not obscure the specific task of the ministerial priest in the Church. From the beginning of the Church it was the responsibility of the Apostles to guide the community in Jesus' spirit. This responsibility was exercised in various forms till the present structure of the triple ministry of bishop, priest and deacon became universally accepted in the 2nd and 3rd centuries. All Christian communities become more and more conscious of the significance of authority and ministry in the Church. The commission of "Faith and Order" states in its document on ministries addressed to all members of the World Council of Churches: "In order to fulfill its mission, the Church needs persons who are publicly and continually responsible for pointing to its fundamental dependence on Jesus Christ, and thereby provide, within a multiplicity of gifts, a focus of its unity. The ministry of such persons, who since very early times have been ordained, is constitutive for the life and witness of the Church" (n. 8). "The Church has never been without persons holding specific authority and responsibility" (n. 9 Faith and Order Paper 111, 1982).

Thus, the representation of Jesus' mission belongs to the very essence of the Church. In her social structure she must contain both: 1. The word of God in its authenticity and authority, teaching, assembling and sanctifying the faithful, 2. the community of the believers which is gathered in response to this divine word, and in which God's reign begins to take shape in our world. This is how the Synod of Bishops in Rome (1971) formulated the place of priests in the Church:

"To the original and unalienable structure of the Church belong, according to the New Testament, (1) an Apostle and (2) a community of faithful united with one another by a mutual link under Christ as Head and the influence of the Holy Spirit". This structure remains the same through the ages: "This essential structure of the Church consisting of the flock and of pastors constituted for this purpose...always remain the norm." In this structure "the priestly ministry alone...perpetuates the essential work of the Apostles: by effectively proclaiming the Gospel, by gathering together and leading the community, by remitting sins and especially by celebrating the Eucharist it makes Christ, the Head of the community, present in the exercise of his work of redeeming mankind and glorifying God perfectly" (Synod Document n. 4).

Jesus' priesthood

Thus the priest of the New Testament embodies Jesus' mission in and for the Church, in and for the world of today. He will understand his priesthood to the same extent as he understands Jesus' mission.

Jesus' priesthood is entirely different from that of the old covenant. In his lifetime no one would have called him a priest as he neither belonged to a priestly family nor exercised any priestly function in the temple. Only in retrospect, once his disciples had encountered him as the Risen Lord and began to grasp the impact of his mission, they realised that in him the true meaning of priesthood was fulfilled. Thus in the letter to the Hebrews, Jesus is presented as the High Priest, in whom the levitical priesthood is transcended and abolished.

Priesthood means *mediation*. In the levitical priesthood mediation between God and man was an office that was performed in the temple by well regulated rituals. Jesus is mediator by his very being. In the depth of his person he is God-with-man and man-with-God. In him we have the redemption from sin (Hebr 9,12). He establishes the new and everlasting covenant (Hebr 8, 7-13; Jer 31, 31-34). Rituals of the Law are abolished. Jesus' body, his earthly life and existence with us, is the final and total sacrifice to the Father.

This is his morning prayer: "When Jesus came into the world he said: "Sacrifices and burnt offerings you did not desire... But a body you have given to me... Behold I come to do your will, O God"" (Hebr 10,5-7; cf. Ps 40,6-8).

Thus Jesus' sacrifice, his self-gift to the Father, is spelled out in his entire life. His mission begins with the proclamation of the Good News: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to proclaim the good news to the poor" (Lk 4,18). Jesus gathers disciples and forms them. He is concerned with the people who are like sheep without a shepherd (Mt 9,36). But his mission leads further to realms which no longer can be expressed in terms of human leadership: Jesus' earthly mission fails, he is rejected by those in authority and the people drift away. The seeds of his word have fallen on barren ground—so it seems. What he has gathered and bound together into a community—the first beginnings of the Church—is now scattered. Jesus underlines the ultimate mystery of his mission: the grain of wheat must die to bear fruit; only when he is exalted on the cross will he draw all people to himself. This is Jesus' total abandonment to God. This is also his final self-gift to us. He gives his life as a ransom for many (Mk 10,45). He is the shepherd who lays down his life for the sheep (cf. Jn 10,11).

Priesthood in the New Testament means realizing Jesus' mission for the community of believers. The priest embodies this mission in his prophetic message of God's reign in the world and society of today, through the leadership in the community, and in the total self-gift of his life to God in the service of his brothers and sisters.

Priestly holiness

If the ministerial priesthood represents Jesus' mission in the Church, it follows that priestly holiness does not consist in the multiplication of spiritual practices—though it is obvious that a priest must plan his life of prayer in a meaningful manner—but quite simply in living out his mission. The Council says: "Priests will acquire holiness in their own distinct way by exercising their functions sincerely and tirelessly in the spirit of Christ" (n. 13). They will grow in the Spirit by

proclaiming the Good News, by involvement in the life and struggle of the people, by celebrating the Eucharist—which is Jesus' sacrifice and our sacrifice — with them and for them.

How, then, does a priest encounter God? God has many ways of encountering his own. A priest, for his part, will never be alone before God. For he can encounter the living God only with and for his faithful. Committed to his mission in Jesus' spirit, he is united to God by being united with God's people.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus calls the Twelve* (Mk 3,13-19).

- "Jesus went out into the hills to pray, and all night he continued in prayer to God" (Lk 6,12): this night in prayer indicates the decisiveness of the hour in which Jesus entrusts his mission to the Twelve.
- "He called those whom he desired": this vocation is not the choice of a career or a profession, it is Jesus' invitation. His mission must be shared.
- "They came to him": the free response of the Apostles is needed. Their vocation is a mutual commitment.
- "He appointed twelve to be with him": the first requirement for the apostolic mission is continued discipleship, the lifelong union with Jesus.
- "To send them out to preach": to continue Jesus' proclamation of the Good News of God's reign in word, deed and life.
- "To have authority to cast out demons": as Jesus came to over-throw the powers of darkness, the Church has to continue the struggle against all evil, all sin and all that cripples and enslaves human life and human society.
- The names of the twelve express the variety of people called by Jesus, not to constitute a homogeneous group but to be the new Israel, the new comprehensive community of believers in which personal and social differences are transcended.

- The inclusion of Judas in the list indicates the risk of entrusting the message of God's reign to human hands and hearts; God continues to trust us through the ages.

2. *Responsible shepherds* (Acts 20, 17-35).

The entire address of Paul to the elders of Ephesus is the portrait of the true apostle. We pick out the verses which point to apostolic responsibility (vv 28-31).

- "Be on guard for yourselves": the responsibility for the community begins with the self-examination of the elders themselves.
- "And for all the flock": the elders are shepherds, after the example of Jesus himself who was concerned for his own.
- "Of which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians": whatever the way in which ministers are chosen or selected, their authority is from above, they are responsible to God.
- "To feed the church of the Lord": in teaching, guiding, serving.
- "Which he obtained with his own blood": the community belongs to the Lord, never must the minister consider it as his own.
- "Fierce wolves will come": there are the dangers from outside, persecutions, destructive and dissolving influences, ideologies.
- "From among yourselves will arise men speaking perverse things": from the beginning till today the Church is threatened by forces of disintegration.
- "Therefore be alert": it is the watchword of priestly responsibility.

3. *The Spirit of the shepherd* (1 Pet 5, 1-4).

- "I exhort the elders among you as a fellow elder": Peter writes in a spirit of collegiality.

- “As a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed”: his title to speak is not formal authority but his experience of Jesus’ passion and the firm hope by which he is rooted in Christ.
- “Tend the flock of God that is in your charge”: fulfil your task not with autonomous authority but as stewards of Jesus Christ who alone is Lord of the Church.
- “Not by constraint but willingly”: it is not a burden but a charism, a service to which the minister has committed himself freely.
- “Not for shameful gain”: it is the temptation of all authority, also in the church, that it be used for selfish interests, material or social.
- “Not domineering”, with overbearing, oppressive, possessive authority.
- “Being an example to your flock”, embodying the message of God’s kingdom in their own life, as Jesus did, and so to be transparent to Jesus’ presence in the community.
- “When the chief shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory”: the minister shares both in the mission of Jesus on earth and in the final glory.

FURTHER READINGS

- Lk 22,31-34: Jesus prays for Peter that he be the support of his brothers in spite of his weakness.
- 2 Cor 4,1-15: God’s power in earthen vessels.
- 2 Tim 1,3-14: Assurance in crisis.
- Constitution on the Church, n. 18a: The office in the Church as service to the community.
- id. n.28: The priestly ministry.
- Decree for priests; n.13: priestly holiness through the exercise of the prophetic, pastoral and priestly mission.

QUESTIONS:

1. Trace the development of your own understanding of the priesthood from the early days of the seminary till now. How has it changed?
2. Have I grown spiritually through my priestly ministry?
3. What are the priorities in my priestly ministry?

FOR REFLECTION:

"Since once again, Lord, I have neither bread nor wine nor altar, I will raise myself above these symbols, up to the pure majesty of the real self. I, your priest, will make the whole earth my altar and on it will offer you all the labours and sufferings of the world" *Hymn of the Universe*: "The mass of the world" TEILHARD DE CHARDIN.

HOW RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER GOD

Religious seem to be a privileged group in encountering God. Their entire life is a consecration to God either in contemplative communities or in the active service of their brothers and sisters. Yet they too have their problems. Here we do not intend to speak about the difficulties they share with other Christians, their prayer life, the temptation to mediocrity and shallowness, their feelings of frustration and aimlessness; but we are concerned with those problems which belong to the specific nature of religious life.

Key Problems of religious life

There is, first, the emphatic insistence of the Council that all Christians are called to holiness: "The followers of Christ... have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers in the divine nature". Hence "all Christians in any state or walk of life are called to the fulness of Christian life and to the perfection of love" (L.G. n.40). The Council speaks no longer of religious life as a "state" of perfection. What then is the specific nature of religious life as compared to the ordinary condition of Christians in the world? What is the meaning of their special consecration through the vows of the evangelical counsels? What is their place in the Church, especially their relation to the community of believers?

Even the meaning of the consecration through the evangelical counsels is today questioned. Jesus came that we should have life, life in its fulness: "Because I live, you will

live also" (Jn 14,19). The Council says that through "holiness a more human manner of life is fostered also in earthly society" (L.G. n. 40). But it would seem that religious life, and in particular the three evangelical counsels, diminish human life.

Human life grows in community, in the enriching and challenging communication from person to person. In the encounter with the "other" each one becomes himself/herself. We grow beyond ourselves through love, sharing and service. The fullest expression of human relation is the union of man and woman in the bond of marriage—this is God's design. In their complementarity they are God's image (cf. Gen 1,27). Is not the renouncement of marriage in religious life a radical diminution of human life, reducing it to isolation, depriving it of the creative power of love?

Food and shelter are the material basis of human existence. We need them to live and to grow. Personal and social life develop in the struggle for our existence. Such was God's design when he put man in command over the earth to cultivate it (cf. Gen 1,26ff). In taking possession of the earth and transforming it through his work man becomes fully man. John Paul's encyclical on Human Work says, that through work "man not only transforms nature...but he also achieves fulfilment as a human being, and indeed, in a sense, becomes more human" (n.9). Through the possession and control over the material world man extends, as it were, his personality into the material sphere. He is a farmer through the land he possesses and cultivates; he is an engineer through his tools and machines. Can we renounce through a vow of poverty the material basis of our existence without giving up our self-responsibility and self-assurance?

Finally, man is created free, different from all creatures which are but part of nature, woven into its cycles, without a life and destiny of their own. Man on the contrary, holds his life in his own hands. Though dependent in a thousand ways on the material world and his social surroundings, man is responsible for himself to shape his life. This is his dignity. Never can he renounce his freedom and shift his responsibility on to other shoulders. Were he to do so he would give up the core of his personality. How then can man make a vow of obedience?

Such questions cannot be answered on a merely theological level. They concern very much the practice of religious life. We do find religious whose life-spring of love has dried up, whose attitude towards people is formal, professional, perhaps outwardly friendly but without any real, personal touch that gives warmth and colour to human relations. Other religious remain immature, without confidence to make personal decisions; their consecration has not become a source of life for them. Many reasons may account for such failures but often they imply a wrong and negative understanding of the evangelical counsels. What is their meaning?

Witness to the Christian vocation

The Mission Decree of the Vatican Council speaks only in a short paragraph on religious life, yet in a concise formula it epitomizes the lengthy debates of the Council on religious life. The decree says that religious life should be fostered right from the beginning in young Christian communities. The reason for this urgency is not only the important contribution of religious for many missionary activities, but "through the deeper consecration made to God in the Church religious life clearly shows and signifies the intimate nature of the Christian vocation" (A.G. n. 18).

A young church needs not only the Christian message and doctrine; it needs the witness of Christian life. What does it mean to be a Christian? In religious life, through the individual and through the community, the meaning of the Christian vocation becomes tangible. Religious are people who have understood what it means to be a disciple of Jesus and they commit themselves in earnestness to a life according to the gospel. Jesus' message of God's reign is not first of all a doctrine about God but the good news of a new creation, coming from God, to be realized through us in our world. How can people ever understand this message if they do not see it actually working, realized in people, in a life that is meaningful and convincing?

To give credibility to the Christian message it must be lived in a full commitment. True, every Christian is consecrated to God by baptism and called to holiness, but often

this response remains something legal, and leads merely to a degree of conformity with laws and observances without an impact on actual life. If God's reign is to come, if our world is to be changed and renewed, conformism will not do. A wholehearted, radical response is needed. There must be people convinced and committed.

For two thousand years there have been Christians totally committed to Jesus, in the midst of the world. But from early times this total commitment has also been lived in an organized manner, in response to special needs of the times. The evangelical counsels are not meant so much to be additional obligations to which religious bind themselves beyond the commandments, but a radical form of living the commitment to Jesus Christ, a witness to his message.

The three evangelical counsels as witness to the Christian life

This, then, is the meaning of *consecrated chastity*: Every Christian is called to love God with his whole heart and soul (cf. Deut 6,6-8; Mk 12, 28f). Religious realize that the absorbing power of divine love can inspire their entire life and work, give them personal fulfilment and lead them to renounce marriage. For them this renouncement is not a diminution of life and love but an opening out beyond the limited concern of their own home and family to all those who are their brothers and sisters, especially to those to whom love and care are denied. This reaching out becomes for the religious a source of joy and ever greater love.

Concerning poverty: all followers of Jesus have to learn that the value and security of human life are not based on material wealth. We do need food and shelter; Jesus himself is deeply concerned with people who are hungry and destitute. Yet he never tires of telling his disciples that the security of wealth is deceptive. The parable of the rich fool demonstrates the folly of losing our heart in possessions (Lk 12,13-21; cf Mt 6,21). In Jesus' encounter with the rich young man we see how wealth becomes a powerful snare that holds us back from a full commitment (Mk 10, 17-22). God alone is the

ultimate support of our life; we must be free from all anxious concern (Mt 6,25-34).

It is for religious to show through the vow of poverty that it is possible freely to renounce possession and security and so to become rich in God. True, in our world of destitution it will not be easy to become witnesses to evangelical poverty. But surely religious can witness to the Christian attitude towards wealth where they cease to live a secluded life of their own apart from society, where they are truly available for the service of the people and, through their style of living, show the freedom and detachment from such goods which in a consumer society are held dear.

Obedience has become problematic in our world. Modern man has become deeply conscious of the dignity of the human person and the need for his genuine self-expression. At the same time we are aware that freedom must be exercised not for the advancement of each individual's status and power but in dependence on God and for the good of human society. Jesus proclaimed God's kingdom as a renewed society of justice, peace and love. Human life is fulfilled if we live in this new community: first seek God's reign and his righteousness and all the rest will be yours (cf Mt 6,33).

Through the vow of obedience religious life is totally oriented towards the proclamation and realization of God's kingdom. It is a witness to all believers, to all men, that a personal career is not the ultimate goal of human life. Real life is more. In God's reign, i.e. in the human society as Jesus visualized it, all relations, all bonds of communication, become channels of God's love realized in human brotherhood. Thus, religious obedience, rightly understood, is not an abdication of human freedom and responsibility but the radical integration into God's own vision of human society. It is possible to commit our whole life to Jesus' mission for the salvation and renewal of the human family. This is how Vatican II sees religious obedience: through it religious "are united more permanently and securely with God's saving will" (P.C. n. 14). Such obedience is the ultimate freedom and dignity of the human person.

How, then, are religious actually encountering God?

They have not a life of their own apart from the Christian community. Religious are consecrated to God not for their own sake only but in the Church, for the Church and for the world. Their presence and work among the people is meant to become an inspiration and assurance for others, to live their Christian vocation. *For religious, encountering God is not a private affair.* It is their charism to live the gospel in its integrity and in full earnestness so as to show in their lives its richness and challenge, to be convincing witnesses to God's kingdom and to give credibility to the Christian message.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The radical following of Jesus* (Mk 10, 17-31).

Christian life is more than the legal fulfilment of the commandments. It leads to the personal response to Jesus' call.

- "What must I do to inherit eternal life?: eternal life consists in knowing the one true God and him whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17,3). 'Knowing' is more than fulfilling the commandments. It means sharing in God's own life.
- "All these I have fulfilled from my youth": the young man refers to the faithfulness in observing the Torah which regulated the life of the Jews.
- "You lack one thing": the legal observance must be completed through the personal surrender to God. God wants the whole person.
- "Sell...give...and follow me": these are three stages of surrendering to God—(1) ridding oneself from attachment and possession, (2) sharing with the poor, (3) following Jesus Christ in freedom.
- "At this saying his countenance fell and he went away sorrowful": many are ready to give their work, few are prepared to give themselves.
- "How hard it will be for those who have riches to enter the kingdom of God": riches become a block. They may consist in material wealth or in any form of power and social status.

— “With men it is impossible, not with God”: the religious vocation is God’s free gift.

2. *The life of the Spirit* (Jn 3, 1-8).

The vocation to religious life is a charism, a gift of the Spirit. It is not the result of human aspirations, nor can it be adequately accommodated in the patterns of our society. Its source is in God. It is new, surprising, bewildering, beyond human calculations.

— “Nicodemus, a pharisee, a ruler of the Jews”: He represents the best of Jewish society, a man of social status, moral integrity and honesty, yet he must learn that God’s kingdom is more than the best of human achievements.

— “Unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God:” God’s kingdom is a new beginning, God’s own gift. Man must be born to a new life. (The text plays with the ambiguity of the greek word “another”, which may mean “again”, so Nicodemus understands it, or “from above”, this is what Jesus means.

— “No one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and spirit”: It is the community of those who allow themselves to be filled and transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

— “The wind blows where it wills. You do not know from where it comes or whither it goes”: As we can register the power of the wind without being able to trace its origin so the life and action of people guided by the Spirit can be seen by everyone but remains a puzzle to merely rational analysis. It results not from patterns of social or psychological behaviour but has its root in God’s free and creative love.

3. *God’s light reflected in his messengers* (2 Cor 4, 1-6)

Read the whole text reflectively. Paul defends himself before the Corinthians against accusations of dishonesty. He has to present the gospel through the witness of his life.

- “We have renounced disgraceful, underhanded ways... By the open statement of the truth we would commend ourselves to every man’s conscience in the sight of God.” Religious life loses its credibility if it is not based on the honest and earnest commitment to God.
- “The gospel is veiled... The god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers”: Jesus himself speaks of the gospel as a hidden treasure (Mt 13,44). The apostle must be transparent to the joy, richness and challenge of the Gospel.
- “What we preach is not ourselves, but Jesus Christ, as Lord, with ourselves as his servants”: The only meaning of religious life is to reveal Jesus Christ and his message.
- “Let light shine out of darkness:” God shines in our hearts to reveal himself, to reveal his saving message to our world.

FURTHER READINGS

- Lk 14, 25-35: Counting the cost when building the house.
- 1 Cor 2,1-9: Wisdom of the world, wisdom of God.
- 1 Cor 7,32-35: Concerned with the things of the Lord.
- 2 Cor, 4,7-12: Strength in weakness.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have I felt the challenge of the gospel? On what occasions? In what passages?
2. Do I feel the conflict between my life and the demands of Jesus? Between my religious life and the gospel?
3. How do I intend to put the gospel into the context of my daily life and work?

FOR REFLECTION:

Saint Teresa of Avila joined a modern convent with relaxed rules of enclosure, open to visitors, with reasonable comfort...
“But once she was touched interiorly by the presence of Christ,

and the inexorable reality of the gospel, free from all disguising phraseology, had come before her mind, she saw in all this the unbearable flight from the real task, the escape from the conversion demanded of her. She got up and was converted. This means she threw away the 'aggiornamento' and created a renewal that was not a compromise but a demanding claim, to commit oneself to the eschatological expropriation of Jesus Christ; to allow oneself to be fully expropriated with the crucified Lord, to belong totally to him, to his body".

J. RATZINGER, on the *Conversion of St. Teresa of Avila*.

MY LIFE IN THE WORLD

"Let us make man in our image, after our likeness; and let them have dominion . . . over all the earth" (Gen 1,26).

The first days of the retreat are devoted to the basic orientation: the meaning of the desert experience for our life, the encounter with God, the social frame in which we live and work, as lay-persons, priests, religious. On this day we reflect in a comprehensive way on the meaning of our existence, of our life in the world.

This question has led men of all ages and cultures to the deepest, never ending search for truth. At the beginning of the Spiritual Exercises we feel the need for such an orientation, but not so much as part of a philosophical system of thought but for an authentic understanding of what we are, and are meant to be. Theoretical reflections would lead us into the realm of concepts; *what we need to see is life as a whole*. Can we fathom the meaning of our existence? Are we able to articulate it?

Ignatius has done it, and has placed it at the outset of the Spiritual Exercises under the title "the First Principle and Foundation" (n. 23). It is a concise text, worded in scholastic language and therefore not easy to fathom in its existential depth. Yet for anyone who has tried to enter into the spiritual world of the Saint, it vibrates with the power of his mystical experience. For him it is anything but an abstract

formula; it is the condensed expression of his comprehensive vision of life and world. We try to follow the keywords of the text and to capture the personal experience expressed in them.

Man is created

These words are found in every catechism, and at first sight they look like a common-place statement. For Ignatius they are the expression of the deepest and richest mystical experience of his life which had come to him at Manresa. There he realized "with great spiritual joy how God created the world". From that time onward he had an entirely new understanding of life and world. The world is "from above" and all creatures are "transparent" to the mystery of God. Hugo Rahner sees in these terms two key concepts of Ignatian spirituality: "All earthly beauty, wisdom and righteousness were merely the reflected splendour of what he had already grasped in the immediacy of his mystical contemplation of God himself" (H. Rahner, *Ignatius the Theologian*, Herder, 1963, p. 4). No creature has ultimate meaning in itself and human life is empty unless it is filled and embraced by God. God is not merely the cause of the world, its hidden origin, but in him only all creatures, their harmony and history, have meaning. Not that we are able to "explain" all things—explaining means analysing the various components and influences of which the world of our experience is made up. But everything falls in place, is seen in God, just as all colours we see are contained in the brightness of the sun. Of his experience at Manresa Ignatius said: "I beheld, sensed within myself, and penetrated in spirit, all the mysteries of the Christian faith". He still had to study his theology in later years to spell out, as it were, his faith, but the intuition, the comprehensive vision comes before his studies; he had found it in God: the world is from above. It is transparent to him.

This, then, is the underlying view of man and world as it is embodied in the Spiritual Exercises. We naturally cannot claim the same experience for ourselves, but it would be wrong to dismiss it as the singular mystical gift of a Saint, which is beyond our grasp. What Ignatius perceived in overwhelming brightness, we know by faith in the dim awareness of God's

love and presence. It may grow to greater lucidity in the following weeks of the Spiritual Exercises as their entire dynamism is based on God's word and the guidance of his Spirit. More and more we realize that world and life have meaning only in God, from above.

The meaning of human life is then spelled out in three words: praise, reverence and service.

To Praise God

Man is created to glorify God. Glory is not something added to the person, a halo of dignity and importance. In biblical language God's glory is Yahweh himself as he is with his people and reveals himself in power for their salvation. The Israelites perceived the presence and power of Yahweh tangibly during their journey through the desert, e.g. in the manna; Moses tells the people: "In the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord" (Ex 16,7) and they found the manna with which God nourished them. The visible sign of God's presence is the cloud which fills the holy tent (Ex 40,34) and goes before them leading them on their way. It is God himself who is with his people.

Through Jesus, God's presence and glory are with us in a new way. In him the disciples encounter God's care and love: "We have seen his glory" (Jn 1,14). Even more, through Jesus, God's glory becomes our own. God makes us share in his life and glory. "We rejoice in our hope of sharing in the glory of God" (Rom 5,2). At the end of time also our body "is raised in glory" (1 Cor 15,43). The transforming power of God is at work in us even during our earthly life: "We all, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Cor 3, 18).

Thus glorifying, praising God means recognizing God's saving love, power and presence. We do it in prayers and hymns which are "the sacrifice of praise to God, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name" (Hebr 13,15). But words have value only if they come from the heart and ring with the truth of life. The real glory of God is our life. It is not what we speak, not even what we do but what we are. This seems

important in our secular society where we are liable to value people only by what they produce, not by what they are.

Thus praising God, the first meaning of our life, consists in living it in its richness and depth, transparent to God's presence and love. Life has no meaning outside itself. True, with a thousand threads it is woven into history and society; yet it has its value and dignity in itself. Never ask a flower why it blossoms; this is its very nature. Today it unfolds its matchless beauty and fills the air with its scent, though tomorrow it may be thrown into the oven. Jesus saw flowers, and he sees our lives. Are we not better than birds and lilies? (cf Mt 6,25-33). We praise God by living the life that he gave us, in which we unfold God's own life and love.

To reverence God

The Bible speaks of the fear of God. The better word would be "*awe*", the sense of the infinite mystery of God who remains beyond our grasp, beyond our control. Awe gives us the awareness of total dependence on him and at the same time of total assurance, because God encompasses our life, past, present and future. This awe is totally different from "*fear*", which is the instinctive reaction to actual dangers and threats, real or imagined. It would be very wrong, indeed it is most harmful, to speak of the fear of God in this sense as if God threatened us. We ought never to be afraid of God.

But awe of God increases as we grow in understanding. Only superficial people think and act in their relation to God as they might deal with a good natured neighbour whose help we need at times, whom we get round to our ideas if needed, whom at times we also may fool. Such people know nothing of God. God is Lord. Ignatius likes to speak of him as the Divine Majesty, which, however, has nothing to do with oppressive domination but means the all encompassing presence and power, the all knowing wisdom and all embracing love of God that enfolds our life and gives us the ultimate assurance that no creature can give.

Thus reverence is not merely a form of behaviour as we express it in liturgy, but the awareness of the beyond, of

the power from above that guides our life and pervades the universe. It is an attitude of silence and adoration before the wonder of God.

To Serve God

We may feel some gratification that at least this last word, by which St. Ignatius expresses the meaning of our life, seems to have found wide recognition in our time. Service is the key-word of the Council when it speaks about offices and responsibilities in the Church. It has even become a slogan in secular society when political parties wish to demonstrate their concern for the people. It is the necessary attitude for renewing the life of the Church and building human society.

Yet the word implies possible misunderstandings. It is a word of action; service is measured by functions which are offered to the community. So it may be understood as a multitude of activities in which God has no real place. We may even use it as a justification for such slogans as "my work is my prayer."

Surely service implies work, yet it is more. Jesus lived among his disciples as one who served, but his impact is measured not by the number of services rendered to them but by his attitude of giving and building up, of reconciling, healing and forming community. He fulfils in himself the ancient figure of the "Servant of Yahweh" whose mission consists in bringing about justice and righteousness in Israel, even to the ends of the earth (cf. Is. 42, 1-4; 49, 5f). His service consists in doing God's work, in bringing about reconciliation, the new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5, 17f).

Serving God, therefore, means integrating our life into the work of God. God is with us not for idle contemplation but in his work of creating and saving, of uniting and fulfilling in himself this vast world of ours. This small life of mine is assumed into this movement; I am called to take part in it with all my being within the limited sphere of my own world, to live not with and for myself only, but in God's kingdom.

And so to save his soul

How then, shall we find our fulfilment as human beings, the wholeness and fullness for which we are searching and striving? There is no fulfilment apart from the true and only meaning of our life: live our life transparent to God's presence . . . *praise God*, in adoration accepting our situation and tasks as they are given to us from above . . . *reverence God* and see ourselves with all that we are and have woven into God's own work of creation and salvation . . . *serve God*. This is the only way of saving our soul, i.e. of finding and living our true life.

The other things on the face of the earth are created for man

Such words invite us to deep philosophical and theological reflections about man, the crown of creation. However, the Spiritual Exercises are not a course in systematic theology but a spiritual initiation. Our relation to God and to the world is expressed in simple language in the parable of the prodigal son where the father speaks to the elder son: "Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours" (Lk 15,31). These words of loving tenderness express our place in the world better than doctrinal explanations. Once we have realized the meaning of our life, the wonder of God's presence, and the whole world as coming from God, it is obvious that created things should never stand between God and us, they should never be a hindrance on the way towards our goal. They are God's majestic, beautiful, bountiful creation which he gives us to be contemplated, and to be perfected and completed. They are the medium through which God cares and provides for us and in which we are meant to find him. In this world that God gives us, God's reign is to be realized.

God wanted it to be our responsibility to realize the goal of creation, his kingdom, "to direct temporal affairs according to God's will" (L.G. n. 31). This demands deep insights and ever new personal decisions. Our life is a continuous movement towards our destiny, woven into world and society. This movement is a free response to God's invitation, given to us from above, by God. Whatever we do, every option should be in line with the meaning of our life, the praise, reverence

and service of God. Thus the norm for our options is contained in the brief formula:

Man must make use of created things in as far as they help him in the attainment of this end; he must rid himself of them in as far as they prove a hindrance to him.

This formula may look too rational for actual life; it seems to stifle creativeness. Is it possible constantly to reflect on our actions? In doing so we seem to place ourselves outside real life, we are like managers who organise their business with cool detachment, or like gardeners who plan their garden and till it—should we not be rather like the flowers which blossom spontaneously? In fact it has been an objection against Ignatian spirituality that it reduces life to rational planning and hinders creative spontaneity.

This surely is a danger. However, what Ignatius expresses here is only an abstract principle which has to be realized in the context of actual life. In fact, according to the Spiritual Exercises, decision-making does not take place at the brain level, though the rational element always remains included, but in the depth of the person, in that innermost sphere where God's Spirit is at work. In a mature person decision-making becomes a spontaneous expression of life that by its innate dynamism moves towards its realization with unwavering consistency, yet always it is adjusted to actual situations. We may compare it with a mountain path: it does not force its way through the rocks but passes them by, sometimes it seems to lose its direction, often the peak is out of sight, yet with consistent determination it leads towards the goal. This is the art of Christian living. It is genuinely human, woven into the world and responding to ever changing situations, still it is never drifting but always moving towards its fulfilment. Every step is an opening towards God.

These norms apply to all spheres of life: to habits of food, sleep, dress, to work and leisure. They affect our involvement in the very personal spheres of our life, from prayer and study, to the way we inter-relate with people. Such norms help us in finding the right attitude towards persons, and finally they help us make major choices, which may have a lasting impact on our life.

We must make ourselves free in relation to all created things

It will not be possible to realize this basic norm in our options and to live in continuous openness towards God unless we have found an inner freedom. The word "indifference" which is often used to express this attitude, is not very inspiring: it is too cold and could easily be associated with aloofness which would be a radical distortion of the Ignatian attitude towards created things. Also the word "detachment" may be misleading as it expresses only the negative side of the attitude, i.e. not to be bound by attachment. We need a positive and constructive attitude which is best expressed as "*freedom*." It is a gospel word which has the ring of victory over crippling and fettering forces, over the powers of darkness which threaten to engulf our life and lure us away from our goal into harmful compromises. It conveys at the same time the joy and assurance of a life committed to God: "Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery" (Gal 5,1).

This gospel freedom must be found and tested with regard to the various spheres of life. It implies the joyful acceptance of the ups and downs in life, of conditions of health, of life situations and surroundings, of work, success and failure. This freedom gives peace, it is the atmosphere in which we make the right decisions. It knows of the beauty and the values of created things, of all that is human, yet it has its centre in God, we may say it is in orbit with God, and in God's presence all creatures become weightless. Only one ultimate desire remains which is expressed in the concluding sentence of the text:

Our one desire and choice should be what is more conducive to the end for which we are created.

The accent lies on "more". True, the whole of creation has but one end. In the Spiritual Exercises this end becomes a personal concern and commitment of the retreatant; it is the core of his life and work. Thus the apparently detached, rational text of the "Principle and Foundation" ends with a dynamic and personal thrust, not to fall back into sluggish complacency, but to *remain ever open and alert to God*.

Ignatius gives no meditation on the Principle and Foundation. The retreatant is expected to enter into the dynamics of this text and to relate it to his life-situations. He ought to become aware of the coherence and comprehensiveness of this vision of life and world.

Every paragraph of the text could be substantiated from the Bible; we take up some aspects.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. Man, Crown and Lord of creation (Gen 1, 26-2, 3).

The key words of this text should impress themselves on our mind. See yourself at the dawn of creation; God gives all creatures to you: "Eat freely of every tree" (Gen 2, 16). Then meditate on these texts:

- "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness": images are terrestrial representations of the unseen. The Israelites were forbidden to make images; they detested the Canaanite images of divinities. The only image of God—the living God—his terrestrial representation is man. God makes him in his image, transparent to his glory. God gives him dignity above all creatures.
- "He let them have dominion...over all the earth": man has to impress his image on the earth. It must become a human world, reflecting God's creative love.
- "Male and Female he created them": in mutual complementarity, to live in family and community; only in mutual communion can we grow and build a human world.
- "Multiply and subdue the earth": it is man's unique task to continue God's creation, to humanize nature. The cradle of mankind is nature, the garden; its fulfilment is culture, the holy city (Rev 21,2), a world on which man has imprinted his stamp. If man ceases to be God's image, instead of humanizing the earth, he destroys it.

- “God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good”: evil, real evil and destruction, comes only from man, when he ceases to be God’s image.
- “God rested on the seventh day from all his work”: true, God is present in his creation. We have to find him in his works, and do our work in obedience. But God is more than his works, and we too have to grow beyond creation, to enter into his rest, and in him to find our final goal (cf. Hebr 3,7-19).

2. *The world as temptation*

God’s creation is good. God saw that it was “*very good*” (cf. Gen 1,31). But its very goodness can make it a temptation, and so pervert its end.

- Creation in its majestic greatness and beauty has a fascination for man. From ancient times it absorbed man’s mind and let him forget the Creator from whom it comes: “They did not recognize the craftsman while paying heed to his works” (Wis 13,1-9). It is more so today.
- The possession of wealth gives wrong security and diverts man from his reliance on God: “Do not heap up treasures” (Mt 6,19); examples are the rich fool (Lk 12,13-21), the rich man who is prevented by his wealth from following Jesus (Mk 10,17-22).
- The entire gospel of John depicts Jesus’ coming into the world as the conflict between light and darkness: “The light came into the world, but people loved darkness better than light” (Jn 3, 19).

- Jesus prays for the disciples: “They are in the world; Holy Father, keep them safe by the power of your name” (Jn 17, 11).

We pray that God be more real in our life than his creatures; that with pure eyes we find him in all creatures, and see all creatures as coming from him.

3. *Jesus' message of God's kingdom* (Mt 6, 24-33).

The message of God's kingdom implies the orientation of the entire life to God.

- "No one can serve two masters": Jesus takes up the ancient alternative between death and life, evil and good (cf. Deut 30,15f). We have to base our life either on earthly and material support or on God.
- "Therefore do not be anxious about your life": Once we have recognized God as source of all life, we find freedom; work and labour remain ours, our worries are in God's hands.
- "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?": Our attention is absorbed by daily needs, food, clothing, etc. Jesus asks us to turn our concern to the core of our life which comes from God.
- "Look at the birds of the air...consider the lilies of the field": the beauty and harmony we find in nature comes from the implicit assurance that each creature has its place in God's plan and fulfils its task in carefree obedience. Nature knows no lazy carelessness; there is dynamism and work, but all move in ultimate assurance.
- "Are you not of more value than they?": how much more must each person accept his/her place and task in the assurance that our real life cannot be lost. Our concerns often go beyond daily needs to a career, professional advance, social status. All this may turn us away from the core of our life, from its gravitational centre in God.
- "Seek first God's kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be yours as well": if our radical orientation towards God is realized in human society, in true brotherhood, also the material needs will be fulfilled.

It is obvious that this passage is not an easy, "supernaturalistic" evasion of the socio-economic problems of society. Jesus stands radically for human brotherhood against social injustice, in continuation of the entire

prophetic tradition. In genuine human communion all material needs must be fulfilled. Thus this text is concerned with the basic orientation of our life. If we are absorbed by material cares in the selfish pursuit of social superiority, economic power and domination, in competition with the neighbour and at the expense of the weak, then we lose the basic orientation of our life and ruin human society.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Ps 8 and 104: God's greatness in creation, man's dignity.
- Sir 16,24-17,32: The majesty of God's creation and his providence.
- Vatican II. The Church and the Modern World, nn. 4-10: the situation of man in the world today. nn. 36 and 59: the recognition of human values.

QUESTIONS:

1. Reflect on the basic orientation of your life: On what basis do you make your decisions? What are the criteria in arranging your timetable, calendar, etc?
2. Reflect on your surroundings, your work, the people, etc. In what way do they help you to be closer to God, in what way do they hinder you?

FOR REFLECTION

"Everything you love for its own sake, outside God alone, blinds your intellect and ruins your judgment of moral values and vitiates your choices so that you cannot clearly distinguish good from evil, and do not truly know God's will".

THOMAS MERTON.

THE BROKEN WORLD

"The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe the good news" (Mk 1,15).

Once more we search for the starting point of our Spiritual Exercises. We have reflected on the world as God wanted it, and on our life and its meaning in God' design. But this is not the world in which we live and the life as we experience it. No lengthy arguments are needed to show that there is something wrong in the created world. We have witnessed the steady increase in our resources and the accelerating pace in our production, far exceeding all our needs. Still, there are the millions of people, hungry and homeless. Our libraries are overflowing with factual knowledge. We are offered every possible comfort; we are able to fill our homes with beauty and music. Our markets are flooded with remedies against all kinds of ills and evils. Still, we seem not to have become wiser, happier, healthier. We have woven a tight network of transport and communication over continents and oceans, and yet our human family is more sharply divided than ever, and we understand each other less and less.

Here, then, is the real starting point of our Spiritual Exercises. If we want to be realistic we must begin with our broken world. Also the Gospel does not begin with the beauty and order of creation but with Jesus "who will save his people from their sins" (Mt 1,21).

Why meditate on sin?

Some preliminary remarks may be helpful. First, *sin is not the centre of the Christian message*. At times it might have appeared to be so. Some preachers considered it the main theme of their sermons to warn Christians against sin and its dreadful consequences. Often churches had an atmosphere of somberness and fear. This surely is not the spirit of Jesus who devoted his entire life to the proclamation of the good news of God's reign, of God's love and concern for us, and of the new creation of peace and brotherhood. His preaching has a new ring, different from that of John the Baptizer who had accused the people of their complacent self-righteousness and the reliance on being children of Abraham, and had warned them of the impending judgement: The axe is laid to the root of the tree (cf Mt 3,7-10). Jesus speaks a new language; his key-words are *love* and *joy* so that John can summarize his message: "These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full" (Jn 15,11). This is the atmosphere of the entire Christian life, it is the spirit also of our meditation on sin.

As Christians we look at sin with the eyes of God himself who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish" (Jn 3,16). *God is greater than sin*. Our broken world is embraced by his love and power. At times we are overwhelmed with a sense of helplessness in the midst of a world of doom and division. This is not Jesus' spirit, who with undaunted courage struggled against the powers of darkness and finally conquered them as the Risen Lord. We need this joyful assurance in our meditation on sin. We cannot face the darkness of evil unless we are assured of God's creative power which will heal us, which will renew the world.

It would, however, be equally dangerous to play down the *seriousness of sin*. Some are inclined to reduce it to a failure in social adjustment or to psychological blocks which prevent us from integrating ourselves into society. We surely have to learn much from social and psychological studies which have broadened our understanding of human behaviour and enriched it enormously. We can no longer be satisfied with the simplistic classification of human actions as good or evil.

Still, in all our actions and attitudes we articulate something of the ultimate orientation of our life. They have a depth dimension which belongs to the core of our personality, through which we are related to God, to our neighbour and to society, which makes our life constructive in our world, or destructive and divisive. With this depth dimension we are concerned. Have we allowed the powers of darkness to penetrate into our hearts and make us partners to the destructive evils which overwhelm our world?

There is one more danger. Many keep in their heart a *secret admiration for sin*. Read the papers and study the mass media, and compare the space given to crime and violence with that given to goodness and peace. Of course often enough crime is condemned, but its presentation in the media caters to the expectation of the people who associate crime with boldness, courage, strength, creative imagination; whereas virtue and good works are praised mostly in obituaries; and in the minds of many, virtues are associated with boredom, conformism and traditional attitudes. It has been stated maliciously that, while heaven must be a good place and hell rather unpleasant; still, the company in hell will be much more interesting than that in heaven! This contrasting, romantic image of sin over goodness is dangerous mostly for young people. It may be that through unearthly and unrealistic biographies we have presented an unattractive image of the Saints. It would be important to show how much of crime and violence actually is a cowardly escape from constructive work and commitment, and how, on the other hand, real goodness is creative and challenging. In fact, Jesus himself could be our supreme example. He was accused of many faults, of lacking observance of the law, of drinking and enjoying meals, but no one ever called him boring. Had he not been a disquieting challenge, he would not have been killed.

What is sin?

The real answer to these false perspectives must come from a deeper insight into what sin really is. Sin has been defined as breaking God's commandments. This is true; but it sounds too individualistic and legal, and it does not

express the full reality of sin. A deeper spiritual awareness is expressed if sin is described as the refusal of God's love. God is not a law-giver who imposes commandments with sanctions, but he surrounds and leads us with his love to which we ought to respond. However, even this description remains within the sphere of the individual relationship to God, which does not include our whole life. For many people it remains elusive. This may be one of the reasons why the sense of sin is dwindling among so many people. We must see sin again with the eyes of the gospel: sin is the destructive and vitiating power that pervades our world, that penetrates into our heart, that embodies itself in our society, in social structures, in politics, in the economic system; it becomes the sin of the world.

It has its root in the human heart, in our freedom. Man makes himself autonomous—this is the core of the account of the first sin in the Book of Genesis—and it remains true today: "Out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft..." (Mt 15, 19). Through sin man separates himself from God and so divorces himself from the source of life. Sin is a radical isolation. Man has broken out of the order of God's love and creation; he makes himself the goal and centre of his life and actions.

Sin does not remain hidden in the heart, it moves on in its destructive course. It first affects the sinner himself. Centred on himself, his vision is blurred: "They became futile in their thinking and their senseless minds were darkened. Claiming to be wise they became fools" (Rome 1, 21f). In his blindness the sinner begins to justify himself and so makes his sinful option ever more his own. It is difficult to acknowledge our failures and to turn from them.

Centred on himself, the sinner asserts himself against his surroundings. The relation to his neighbour is no longer solidarity but competition. Sin becomes a social reality. Justice, truth, peace are changed into hatred, envy, revenge. In the Book of Genesis the sin in paradise is followed by the murder of Abel. (chap. 4).

Sin not only affects personal relationships but embodies itself in society at large. Sections of people group together in their common interests against others: social and economic

groups, ethnical and cultural units, nations, often confronted in hardened antagonism with hostile frontiers, blind to their mutual obligations, to each other's needs and interests. Wars are waged with murderous weapons and with equally deadly mass media. Sin enwraps the human family and poisons the atmosphere in which we live and breathe.

This is how sin must be seen; not as individual failure only, but as the ruin of our world and society. Thus St. Ignatius wants us to begin the meditation on sin with (1) the ancient tradition of the revolt of the angels against God (cf. 2 Pet 2,4; Jude 6); (2) then to turn our eyes to the sin of our first parents and the corruption that came from it over the whole of mankind; (3) finally to the sin and condemnation of others who may have sinned less than myself. This meditation on the "triple sin", on its origin and its ever growing powers as it spreads over the world, is in no way meant as diversion from myself, from the awareness of myself as a sinner. On the contrary, in these meditations I see myself before God as sinner, belonging to a sinful race. This flood of sin which comes from untraceable origins and has broken into our society and history and pervades our world, has entered also my own heart.

Never should the Spiritual Exercises be reduced to a merely subjective spirituality which is concerned only with the personal relation to God. We belong to a broken world; we are called to a new creation. But this solidarity with the world does not diminish my personal responsibility. Only if I recognize myself as a sinner can I respond to God's word of grace and offer myself to Jesus in his mission for the renewal of the world.

Before Jesus crucified

Yet, with all these reflections it still often remains difficult to come to a deep personal awareness of sin. We do see its devastating impact on the world; we may also have realized its blinding, paralysing and disintegrating influence on ourselves. But all this does not touch the core of our being. God himself has to speak to us, to make us realize what sin is, what it means to be a sinner. God has spoken in his Son, in Jesus crucified.

Ignatius concludes the meditation on sin with a "colloquy" with Jesus crucified (n. 53). This conclusion seems hardly connected with the preceding reflections on the sins of the angels, the first parents, and other sinners, and the consequence of these sins. Yet we feel that with this colloquy, where he leaves behind rational reflections and enters into Jesus' presence, he comes into his own. This colloquy contains the core of the meditation on sin.

What is sin? Once our lifeline with God is broken we are alone. We can fill our life with many things and activities, but they cannot sustain us. We drift into desolation and death. There is no support or hope.

Yet we are not alone. Jesus is with us to share our desolation. He too dies, not because he sinned but because he became our brother, member of our broken family. He shares our desolation and abandonment.

Why does he come? This is the question we ask him in the colloquy; "How is it that, though he is the creator, he has stooped down to become man and to pass from eternal life to death here in time that thus he might die for our sins?" Jesus does not answer, he does not speak—God speaks in Jesus his Son. This is God's love for us that he gave his Son so that we should not be alone in our exile, to give us the assurance that we have a home, that God's love is with us in all our darkness. So Ignatius makes the retreatant ask three questions

1. "*What have I done for Christ?*" If God so loves me, how is it that I turn from him and close myself into the narrowness of my own life?
2. "*What am I doing for Christ?*" This is an hour of decision, of response to God's love and invitation.
3. "*What ought I to do for Christ?*" I have to look towards the future, to prepare myself for a commitment. In these spiritual exercises I should find the orientation for my life.

Thus the mediation on sin leads to the first encounter with Jesus Christ. He is with us in our broken world where we are abandoned, overwhelmed by the powers of darkness. He is not a mighty Saviour but our brother, sharing our

life and death to lead us into a new life. In him, in his agony and death, I see where we really are, what sin is, where the proud autonomy of sin has led us. In him we awaken to the joyful awareness that we are not alone but that all sin is embraced by God's love and healed in Jesus' wounds.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. What is sin? Election — refusal destruction

(Mt 23, 37-24, 2)

Chapter 23 of Matthew contains Jesus' reproach to the leaders of the people. In the concluding paragraph he sums up the bitter experience of his rejection:

- "Jerusalem, how often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings": this is God's saving love extended to Israel from ancient times, offered in Jesus to the people as a final invitation. It is God's love reaching out also to me in a thousand ways.
- "But you would not!": Israel's history is a sequence of refusals, of murmuring and faithlessness. Also Jesus is rejected by the leaders of the people. Every sin is a refusal of God's invitation. This refusal is at times open, more frequently it is hidden and disguised. As Israel had "reasons" to reject Jesus, we have reasons, excuses and explanations. But in the depth of the heart we know that we refuse God's call.
- "Behold your house is forsaken and desolate": the holy city, the temple will be destroyed. We should not think of Jerusalem's destruction, or any other calamity, as acts of God's revenge. It is not God who condemns, but "he who does not believe is condemned already" (Jn 3, 18): he condemns himself by divorcing himself from the source of life. God gives freedom, respects our freedom, allows us to choose and to go our own way. This is my dignity, this is my responsibility, to choose between death and life. (cf. Deut 30, 15).

- “Not a stone will be left upon another that will not be thrown down”: in a transition to the following chapter the disciples draw Jesus’ attention to the magnificent structures of the temple and the city. But they are doomed. Exteriorly Jerusalem still shines in its splendour, but it has lost its life-spring, it will be destroyed. Whatever my status in the Church, my achievements, my deeds, my efforts, they will prove empty unless my heart is faithful.

2. *How sin came into the world* (Gen 3)

A full understanding of this text requires deeper exegetical studies. We reflect only on the key issues of this account of the origin of sin — also of our sin.

- “Did God say: ‘You shall not eat of any fruit in the garden’”: this is the deceptive question. Does God limit our freedom, envy our growth? Is God a rival for man? Much of the modern revolt against God is based on this misapprehension.
- “We may eat of the fruit of the trees of the garden”: the whole of creation is given to us to use it, to develop it. (cf. Gen 1, 28f).
- “You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree which is in the midst of the garden,” (which is) “the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, lest you die” (Gen. 2, 17): human freedom remains under God. Our life is inserted into God’s plan of creation and salvation. He who destroys this order, destroys himself.
- “You will not die...your eyes will be opened and you will be like God knowing good and evil”: this is the fallacious promise of human autonomy and emancipation ever tempting, though proved destructive in life and in history.
- “The woman saw that the tree was good for food... a delight to the eyes...to be desired to make one wise”: the fascination of sin.
- “The eyes of both were opened and they knew that they were naked”: with their eyes opened they

see the truth, not their likeness of God but the shame of their nakedness.

- “The man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the Lord God”: God’s presence is no longer an assurance but a threat.
- “The woman whom you gave me...gave me the fruit...the serpent beguiled me and I ate”: this is the beginning of the litany of excuses, of shifting responsibility for failures.
- “God sent him forth from the garden of Eden”: the exile begins, man estranged from himself, from his destiny and happiness. Yet he is not abandoned. God’s love follows him; Jesus joins him in his exile. On his cross he promises all sinners: “today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23, 43).

3. *Sin in human society* (Mt 25, 31-46).

Sin turns not only against God but becomes the destructive power of human society. The attitude towards the neighbour will be the ultimate criterion of good and evil.

- “He will separate all the nations, one from another”: it is the final judgement in which the outcome of our human life will be revealed. The gulf between good and evil, which is hidden in our world, will be manifest.
- “Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world”: this is God’s kingdom, the new creation, the community of all men united in love.
- “I was hungry and you gave me food...”: to this kingdom belong all those who build this community in actual sharing in all spheres of mutual support: food, drink, receiving strangers, etc.
- “As you did it to one of the least of my brethren, you did it to me”: this is not merely social service; God himself is present and active in our relations. His love flows into our human society. It is embodied in Jesus and becomes the bond that unites all. In

your neighbour you meet Jesus, in your service to him you give yourself to God. This is God's kingdom.

- "Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire... For I was hungry and you gave me no food...": those who refuse solidarity and responsibility for the neighbour, do not belong to God's kingdom. Where this refusal becomes a persistent option, it excludes from the communion of love and salvation. To be excluded means to be cursed, outside the realm of grace and peace.
- "They will answer: Lord, when did we see you hungry...?": they closed their eyes to God's kingdom, they blinded themselves to the light that came into the world.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Is 5, 1-7: The vineyard planted by the Lord that bore sour grapes (cf. Ps 80, 8-19).
- Ez 16: Israel's vocation, sin, salvation.
- Mt 22, 1-44: The invitation to the marriage feast; the refusal.
- Lk 13, 6-9: The fig-tree that bears no fruit.
- Rev 2, 1-7: The first love that was lost.

QUESTIONS:

1. Did I ever encounter sin with its undisguised destructive power, in individuals and families? Recall the details.
2. How do I realize sin's impact in my own life?

FOR REFLECTION:

"Before you (O Lord) the abyss of human conscience lies open. What would be hidden from you even if I would not confess it before you? I would hide you from me, not me from you."

AUGUSTINE, *Confessions* 10,2.

MY SIN

"You say: I am rich, I have prospered, and I need nothing; not knowing that you are wretched, pitiable, poor, blind and naked" (Rev. 3, 17).

In the meditation on sin we turn to ourselves. We are not concerned with reflections on our sinful world or on the evils of society — they are only the mirror in which we have to recognise ourselves, to find the real, the only true starting point for renewal. *I must look into myself — I must have the honesty and courage to do it.*

True and false humility

Again a warning is needed. These reflections on sin are not meant to darken or diminish our self-image. Many people, often very serious Christians, have a poor image of themselves. They may consider this an attitude of humility. They are very conscious of their limitations and deficiencies; they may ignore their talents and gifts and discount or even deny the serious efforts of their life and work. Various reasons may account for this tendency to self-depreciation. But it should be clear that such denigration has nothing to do with true humility, which consists in the grateful and courageous acceptance both of God's gifts and of our limitations, and the faithful use of these gifts for God's service among the people with whom we live. Depressing depreciation and paralysing feelings of self rejection have no place in a Christian life.

Nor is this meditation on sin meant to arouse guilt feelings, which have nothing to do with true contrition for our sins. Guilt-feelings are the expression of the wounded ego. I feel insecure and threatened because I have failed in fulfilling the commandments. I have not been able to live up to the standards which I have set for myself. I have lowered myself in the eyes of others. All these feelings are centered on the ego; I am concerned about *myself*, *my* security, *my* image. Scruples also belong to the sphere of guilt-feelings. A scrupulous person is concerned not about God, the neighbour or the world around but about *his own security before God*. It is not easy to overcome such preoccupations and feelings. Clear insights, patient and persistent efforts and often prudent guidance will lead beyond these experiences of deep anxiety. But it ought to be clear that they have little to do with a true renewal of our Christian life. *God calls us beyond ourselves* and the narrow concerns of our ego—seek first God's reign and his righteousness, and he will take care of all your anxieties. Our justice does not consist in a faultless record of our life but in our faith and self-gift to God. This was Paul's personal experience and message (cf. Rom 3, 21-23; Phil 3, 8f). It is the aim of the Spiritual Exercises to liberate us from a self-centered ego, to lead us to a genuine commitment to God in Jesus Christ.

Know yourself

However, in these meditations on sin we ought to come to a true knowledge of ourselves and free ourselves of self-righteousness and illusions, which come from our ego, from the deep-seated need to protect and foster it. Who likes to recognise and accept his faults? All life has an inbuilt system of self-protection and self-defence. Where our body is concerned, we instinctively avoid dangers and defend ourselves against aggression. Our mind is doing the same. We find it difficult to admit that we are unable to control our tongue, that we are lazy and greedy, or envious and jealous of our neighbour and harbour feelings of revenge. All these and so many other movements of our heart, we consider improper and in conflict with what we want to be, and so we suppress them, we would not admit them as even possibly our faults. We disguise and excuse these feelings and link them

with lofty principles. So we call ourselves "honest" and one who always speaks the truth while in reality we are rude and easily lose our composure. If we are fond of comforts, we condone it with the need of avoiding tension and stress. When we are in conflict with others, we convince ourselves of *their* vanity, ambition and politics! Jesus said: "You see the speck in your brother's eye but do not notice the log that is in your own eye" (Mt 7, 3). How much of our ingenuity goes into finding excuses, in creating illusions, to avoid seeing ourselves as we really are.

The temptation to protect ourselves and to build a world of illusions affects also groups of people: social, ethnic, religious and national groups. They all have their collective ego, are concerned with safe-guarding their common interests and projecting a favourable image of themselves. We are here more concerned with religious groups.

The gospels tell us how Jesus was confronted not so much with individual hostility and rejection as with the collective prejudices of religious groups in his surroundings. These are familiar to us by the names of Pharisees and Sadducees, and of the theologians of his time, the Scribes. It would be misleading to take Jesus' invectives against them as our only source of information; for in fact, serious and committed people were among them. But many of the accusations as they are recorded in the gospels are a common feature of religious groups also today. Jesus' criticisms should be used as a mirror of regular self-examination today mostly by priests and religious. It is their profession too to teach and to preach. Jesus says of his enemies: "They teach but do not practice. They bind heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on men's shoulders; but they themselves will not move them with their finger" (Mt. 23, 3f). They must keep their prestige in society and so "they do all their deeds to be seen by men... They love places of honour... and salutations in the market-places" (Mt 23, 5-7). They cultivate an image of faithful observance by fulfilling legal prescriptions while their heart harbours evil: "You cleanse the outside of the cup and the plate but the inside is full of extortion and rapacity... you are like whitewashed tombs which outwardly appear beautiful but within are full of dead bones and uncleanness" (Mt 23, 25-27). They glorify the

prophets of past ages but resist God's message which comes to them in the present; so they really are "sons of those who murdered the prophets" (Mt. 23, 29-31). All this has been repeated in the history of the Church; it remains the temptation of all who hold official and honoured positions in the Church also today.

We may go a step further and reflect on the peculiar temptation which seems to be connected with the Christian message itself. The Christian community is based on faith in the Risen Lord, Jesus, who has conquered all evil, has taken away our sins and has poured out the Holy Spirit on his Church with the wealth of his gifts. We are the new creation and enjoy its peace and blessing. So it can happen—it has happened too often—that our praying and singing of the wonderful life and in the communion of love in the Church become unrealistic. We create a world of illusion as if all this had already been achieved. The Vatican Council tells us that "in the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem towards which we journey as pilgrims" (S.C. 8). True, it is a foretaste, but we are still pilgrims. It is our part in this earthly life to remain with Jesus in his laborious mission, struggle and rejection. The new life which he gives us through the Holy Spirit must be lived in this earthly city in patience, often in contrast and conflict with our surroundings.

The temptation to escape from the earth-bound duties of a Christian life is as old as the Church. Read Paul's letter to the Corinthians who were so proud of the glorious gifts of the Spirit, of tongues and prophecy, which they loved to display in their assemblies. They had listened to modern theologians who had lectured in terms of contemporary philosophy on a much higher level than the simple proclamation of faith as they had heard it from Paul. So their sense of superiority had swept them off their feet. They had forgotten the elementary demands of a Christian community; they were split into parties (cf. 1 Cor 1, 10-13) and the way they celebrated their gatherings of love, the agape, with its climax in the Eucharist had become a grave scandal (1 Cor 11, 17-34). Paul knows only one remedy: return to Jesus as he lived

his earthly life in humility and service, giving up his life for us on the cross. When his life was being drowned in hatred and betrayal, he gave himself to us in the ultimate sign of his love, in the Eucharist: "on the night when he was betrayed" (1 Cor 11, 23).

We have to do the same: All the great words of the Bible, *joy*, *peace* and *love*, have to be interpreted in the light of Jesus' earthly life. When we preach joy we cannot forget the millions who still carry Jesus' cross and break down under its weight. Peace in the language of Jesus does not mean compromise or the cowardly avoidance of conflict. Peace includes resistance to the powers of oppression; Jesus also brings the sword of judgment. Finally love cannot be without justice. Love is not a sheltered harbour for rest but the divine power that brings about a new creation in spite of conflict and defeat.

This, then, is the soberness of the Christian life. Conversion must take place in the depth of our heart; God's reign must come in our real world. God's promises are not cheap gifts for children who do not know their price. Jesus bought us with his precious blood: "You were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6, 20). No one can share in the joy, peace and love of the Risen Lord unless he is united with Jesus in his life and death.

How to know ourselves?

There are many ways by which we can make progress in our self-knowledge, and we should faithfully and sincerely make use of them. We must listen to others and allow, even encourage them to share their observations; we may gradually learn to see and hear ourselves through the eyes and ears of others. This will necessarily balance our self-image. We have to watch and assess the ups and downs of our emotional life and develop a sense of detachment and humour towards ourselves. There are also special occasions to look into our life: the daily examinations of conscience; regular celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation, days of recollection and our annual retreat.

However, none of these approaches promises true success unless it is based on, and accompanied by sincere, earnest

prayer. We need the light of the Holy Spirit to penetrate into the depth of our heart; we need courage to face ourselves.

Thus St. Ignatius wants us in these meditations on our sins to pray for a triple grace: 1. *A deep knowledge of my sins* and a feeling of abhorrence for them. 2. *An understanding of the disorder of my actions*, that, filled with horror of them, I may amend my life and put it in order. 3. *A knowledge of the world* that, filled with horror, I may put away from me all that is worldly and vain." These three petitions, he advises, should be addressed: (1) to Mary that she implore their fulfilment from her son; (2) then to Jesus that he may obtain them from the Father; (3) finally to the Father himself that he, the eternal Lord, may grant them to me (n. 63).

So, we first pray for the grace of a deep knowledge of our sins, the recognition and acceptance of failures and mistakes, of what in the light of the Gospel is wrong in us, without excuses and explanations.

But our words and deeds flow from our heart. We pray further for the understanding of the disorders in our heart. We cannot successfully fight against symptoms unless we find the root-cause of our ills. Much insight, and often the experience of others is needed to probe into the deeper layers of the human heart. Many of our attitudes towards others stem from deep-rooted feelings of insecurity and rejection, which may have their origin in long forgotten days of childhood. The Spiritual Exercises are not meant to become a study in psychology; deep-rooted problems of personality ought to be tackled outside the retreat. Still, the silent days of retreat lend themselves to deeper insights into our heart, to open it fully to the Lord.

Our life is woven into the context of the world. We are children of our time; the movements, aspirations and anxieties of the surrounding world affect us. Also our thinking and the values which determine our life are constantly influenced by the people and social structures around us. Hence, the third prayer to know the world. Ignatius speaks here about the world in the pejorative sense, as it is found in John's Gospel: the world which does not receive Jesus Christ, which loves

darkness better than light. To renew ourselves we must have insight into the values, trends and movements which shape the world of today, the destructive powers, but also the promising aspirations of a young generation.

This triple grace of a deep insight into myself and the influences that shape my life should be implored through the intercession of Mary who gave herself to God free from all reserve, through Jesus Christ whose entire life was surrendered to the Father, from God the Father himself, the source of all life.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION.

1. *My sin*

Make your meditation in deep union with Jesus Christ. His message rings in your heart: The Kingdom of God is at hand. A new world is in the making; you are meant to belong to the new creation!

How will your life be?

Take Jesus to the various places of your life and work, to the people with and for whom you are living and working. See your life, work, relationships through his eyes.

- Go to church/chapel, the privileged place of encountering Jesus. Reflect on your prayer, the earnestness of your participation in the Eucharist, the depth of your consecration to God, your personal prayer.
- Go in imagination to the places of your work and reflect on your duties and responsibilities, your professional involvement, your efforts for a deeper understanding of the meaning of your work.
- Meet the people of your professional world and review your relations with them. Are they too critical? compassionate and understanding? full of tension? How do you speak to them? about them?
- Meet the people of your personal world: family, community, friends. Review your correspondence. What is the human depth of these relations? Are they channels of God's presence and love, for others, for yourself?

In these reflections on the wide range of your life, the silent presence of Jesus is essential: is every detail of your life and work inspired by him?

2. *The soberness of the Christian life:* The letter of James.

This letter is a down-to-earth reflection on our Christian life in its various dimensions:

- The Gospel is the mirror of the Christian life: “Be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger... Be doers of the word, not hearers only” (1, 19-25).
- Faith must bear fruit in works: “What does it profit if a man says he has faith but no works? Can his faith save him?” (2, 14-24).
- Let your teaching be a challenge to yourself: “You know that we who teach shall be judged with greater strictness” (3, 1).
- Guard your tongue: “If anyone makes no mistake in what he says he is a perfect man... The tongue is a fire... No human being can tame the tongue... With it we bless the Lord and with it we curse men” (3, 2-12).
- Avoid anger, bitterness, jealousy: “If you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts do not boast and be false to the truth... The wisdom from above is pure, peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits” (3, 13-18).
- No big dreams; do good today. “All such boasting is evil. Whoever knows what is right to do and fails to do it, for him it is sin” (4, 13-17).

3. *The blindness of the heart* (Rev 3, 14-20).

You may contemplate one of the healings of blind people by Jesus, e.g. Bartimaeus (Mk 10, 46-52), the symbol of the blindness of the heart, the desire to see; when he is healed, he follows Jesus on the way to Jerusalem.

The Book of Revelation contains the letter of warning against the blindness of the heart:

- “I know your works: you are neither cold nor hot... I will spew you out of my mouth”: the resignation to mediocrity has no place in God’s kingdom.
- “You say, I am rich, I have prospered, I need nothing”: the more we drift away from God, the less we are aware of our poverty; we are able to divert ourselves with plans, activities, relations, but we lose the spring of life.
- “Buy from me gold...and white garments to clothe you...and salve to anoint your eyes that you may see”: God alone can restore our life and make us see what we need.
- “Those whom I love I reprove and chasten”: to those who follow Jesus God gives peace. Also those who turn from him he follows with his love, he makes them restless. (cf. Rules for the Discernment of Spirits, n. 314).
- “I stand at the door and knock:” it is for me to be attentive, to open, to let him in.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Baruch, 1,15-3,8: The prayer of the people in exile.
Daniel 9,3-23: Prayer for forgiveness.
- Mt 7, 15-20: Be on your guard against false prophets.
 - Mt 12, 33-37: Healthy trees are distinguished by their fruit.
 - Lk 13, 22-30: Enter through the narrow door.

QUESTIONS:

1. Where do I see the danger for my commitment to the Lord?
2. What are the excuses and disguises of my faults? What are my escapes to avoid duty and responsibility?

FOR REFLECTION:

“Take from me all that separates me from thee,
give me all that draws me to thee,
take me from me and give myself wholly to thee”
(Prayer of ST. NICOLAUS VON DER FLUE).

A NEW HEART

"Create in me a clean heart, O God" (Ps 51, 10).

The good news of the forgiveness of sin is already part of the prophetic message: "I have swept away your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist" (Is 44, 22); "I will forgive their iniquity and I will remember their sins no more" (Jer 31, 34).

Jesus does more. He takes away the sin of the world (cf. Jn 1, 29). It is not enough that sins are forgiven, they must be destroyed. What would it help us if God covered our sins with his mercy but their poison would remain in us and continue its work of destruction? Our world must be freed of the crippling, paralysing and divisive powers of evil. God's creation must be renewed. First of all our heart must be renewed by God's creative power.

The promise of a new creation

This actually has been the age-old expectation of the nations all over the world: the hope of return to a golden age, a renewed world as it came from God at the dawn of creation. This expectation is enshrined in the Bible as the hope for the Messianic age. It broke forth most forcefully at the time of exile: "I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you... A new heart I will give you

and a new spirit I will put within you and I will take out of your flesh the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh." (Ez 36, 24-26).

The expectation of this renewal remained alive also in the early Church. The first Christians had recognized Jesus as the Messiah, but it was obvious that his work was not yet fulfilled and so they expected his final coming in glory for the fulfilment of his mission. "Then when all things are subjected to Jesus Christ, the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things under him that God may be everything to everyone" (1 Cor 15, 28). So it must be. If God created all things and "saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Gen 1, 31), then this world cannot just glide out of his hand and end up in destruction and death. God's work cannot fail.

How will our world be renewed? The Bible tells us that God wants our world to be a paradise. But we lose it through sin; more and more we turn our world into a desert. Greed and exploitation make our world less inhabitable and our society less hospitable. Blind selfishness, ambition and rivalry destroy our community and enslave millions. This world will always be our world. If there is to be a new and better world, *there must first be new human hearts*. This is our theme of today.

Surely human behaviour is greatly influenced by the social and economic structures in which people live, and there is a pressing need to transform and humanize these structures, to give all people the opportunity to live a truly human life. But it would be wrong, it would lead to illusion, if all our hopes for a better world were pinned on only political or social changes. The Christian message is rather that first our heart must be changed. Jesus calls people to repentance because God's kingdom is coming. In our time Pope Paul VI echoes this message in his call to evangelization: "There is no new humanity if there are not first new persons" (*Evangelli Nuntiandi* n. 18).

Born anew

This renewal must come from God, it is God's reign. Only the creator, God, can say: "Behold I make all things

new" (Rev 21, 5). This we find difficult to understand. Our technical age has learned to take things firmly in hand and to solve problems with the resources at our disposal. We do not expect solutions to fall from heaven.

But to solve problems we need a new heart, we must be born anew. John writes in the beginning of his gospel: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born not of blood, not of the will of the flesh nor the will of man, but of God" (Jn. 1, 12f). A new life is needed with new senses, with a new understanding. This is what Jesus told the startled Nicodemus: "Truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew he cannot see the kingdom of God." (Jn 3,3,).

In the Synoptics Jesus' language is more simple. Jesus sees in children the simplicity required to understand and accept the message of God's love: "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child shall not enter it" (Mk 10, 15). Children are still able to receive gifts. They have not yet adopted the commercial attitude that dominates most of our human relations: everything has its price... a favour for a favour. Children live on love and gifts. So is God's kingdom. We cannot earn it. We cannot bring it about with our human efforts. We can only open our hearts for its coming, for God's gift. We must be born anew as God's children.

This is not easy. It actually implies the most radical and difficult self-surrender. In Jesus' time the Pharisees were ready to make any sacrifice for the sake of their religious commitment—inconveniences with no end in the fulfilment of the law, prayers and frequent fasts. But they were not ready to surrender themselves to God, to be children before him and to accept his kingdom as the gift of his love. For Paul it was the breakthrough in his life, his "conversion", when he realized that his righteousness did not come from the fulfilment of the law and the traditions but from God alone. "I have no righteousness of my own based on law but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith" (Phil 3, 9). It is God's free gift of love received with an open heart. Thus the renewal of our life does not begin with practical resolutions (which may and must come in due time) but with

the deep awareness that God's love and power are moving in my heart and drawing me beyond myself towards a new life. I allow him to take possession of my thinking and planning, of myself. This is my task during these Spiritual Exercises.

My task

However, reliance on God's love does not diminish my own responsibility. In his creation God is alone; He speaks and there is light, firmament, earth and waters and all creatures. But he entrusts his creation to us. For ever this world will be our world, our human world. *God's world has become our task.* This is our dignity and responsibility.

This task begins in my own heart. Too often we try to change our neighbour, we turn to some action plan, a scheme for the betterment of our society. All this may be very necessary, but surely it is not the beginning, and it may simply be an escape. I must turn to myself, the seriousness of my commitment to God, my many relations to people, the realm of my professional work.

The sacrament of the new heart

In the renewal of our heart the sacraments of the Church hold a special place, especially the sacrament of reconciliation, a source of healing. The renewed understanding and the more meaningful practice of this sacrament have been a matter of deep concern for the Church in these past decades. We are aware of its decline. Its administration and reception had often become too mechanical and routine-like, without a deeper impact on the life of the faithful and the Christian Community as a whole. The frequency of its use has dropped alarmingly; attempts to restore the traditional practice have largely failed.

This obviously is not the place for a theological and pastoral study of the problems involved. However, our reflections on the renewal of heart which is both God's gift and our human response towards a new life, lead us directly to the real meaning of this sacrament and thus may be helpful for its meaningful celebration during the retreat and in the course

of our life. This sacrament is the liturgical celebration of the new heart, of on-going Christian conversion.

Jesus was sent not only to proclaim God's forgiving and saving love but to take away the sin of the world. His mission is to be continued, it is part and parcel of the life of the Church. So Jesus entrusted this mission to his disciples. All four gospels conclude with the final mission to proclaim salvation (Mk 16, 16), to make disciples, to baptize them for a new life (Mt 28, 19) and to proclaim the message of repentance and forgiveness to all nations (Lk 24, 47). Most articulate is St. John: "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained" (Jn 20, 22f). This is Jesus' Easter gift to the Church. She is sent not only to preach forgiveness, but to make God's forgiving and renewing love real and effective in our life.

This, then, is the core of sacramental absolution: Once more the Holy Spirit with his lifegiving and healing love is poured out on us. We are restored to full communion with the faithful and again share in the dignity of God's children, just as the son in Jesus' parable who returned to the father. He was embraced, a ring was put on his finger and sandals on his feet so that it should be clear that he was son, not one of the servants, and a feast was celebrated with music and dancing (Lk 15, 11-32). This is what Jesus wants to be realized by all who turn to him in the sacrament of reconciliation.

God's welcoming and lifegiving love, however, must be received in our hearts with repentance. This has often been misunderstood as if God wanted us to be punished and to bear burdens of suffering. We cannot think of a God who likes to see his children in pain, but God respects our freedom and dignity. We have to make our decision and to break the fetters of our selfish isolation. This is painful. We have to act against attitudes and habits which may be deeply engrained in us. In this struggle we are moved by the Holy Spirit and supported by the entire community and the prayer of the Church.

In the early centuries this effort of the penitent was actually the main concern of the ecclesial reconciliation of

sinners. Through prayer and penance penitents had to express the seriousness of their conversion. Today hardly anything of the ancient austerity is left in the practice of the Church. But this lack of legal injunction cannot dispense us from the seriousness of a personal commitment. Sacraments are not a substitute for personal decisions and efforts. The actual fruit of a sacrament is measured by our disposition, the capacity and readiness to receive God's grace. The brightness of the sun does not give us light if our eyes are blind; streams of living water will not quench our thirst unless we fill our cup.

In the Middle Ages the main stress in sacramental reconciliation was shifted to the actual verbal confession of sins, as a sign of true repentance. Why have we to confess our sins? Already at the time of St. Augustine people argued that as they had sinned before God, so they would confess their sins before him, but not before a priest. This argument is not conclusive for we always are members of our human community. Whatever good we do and whatever sin we commit, even our most secret failures, have their repercussions on the surroundings. What a difference it would make in our life if we were conscious of the deep, often imperceptible bonds which link us with these surroundings. Thus it is right that in the Eucharist we confess our sins before God and *our* brothers and sisters. In confession, then, we confess before the priest as representative of the Church. The Council has asserted anew the community character of sacramental reconciliation in which sinners "obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offence committed against him and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins" (*Lumen Gentium* n. 11). Besides, experience tells us that we must exteriorly profess what is hidden in our heart if our renewal is to be genuine. If we do so the words of absolution and reconciliation have their full meaning. The isolation of sin is thus broken, we are again living members of the body of Christ.

We see then that the sacrament-of-the-new-heart is the celebration of the encounter of God with the sinner. God's love, his leading grace, his life giving power come to us. We on our part open our hearts to God in confession and wholehearted repentance, ready to accept the pain and struggle implied in this new beginning, the renewed life in Jesus Christ.

A meaningful renewal of sacramental reconciliation, therefore, will lay all emphasis on the *personal encounter* with God in Jesus Christ. New ways of doing this have proved helpful; they can easily be used in the context of the Spiritual Exercises. The confession will consist not merely in the enumeration of sins, but in the grateful praise of God for the guidance and love we have experienced. It will include the actual situations of our life, the difficulties we face, our failures and sins. It will lead to the prayer for forgiveness, new light and guidance, for the healing and renewing power of God, and conclude with an absolution, the peace of the Church, the peace of Easter.

Thus the first week of the Spiritual Exercises leads to the renewal of our life in Jesus Christ. In him we shall discover the richness of our new life. This will be the content of the second week.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION:

1. *The promise of the New covenant* (Is 49, 14-16; Jer 31, 34; Ez 36, 22-36).

Read these texts meditatively. They are addressed to Israel in the distress of exile and contain the promise of salvation. (*Is 49, 14-16*) God's concern for his own.

- "Zion said: the Lord has forsaken me": the experience of desolation in our world—in the Church—in my personal life.
- "Can a woman forget her sucking child?": all human love and concern are only the limited participation in God's concern for his own.
- "Your builders outstrip your destroyers": God's power to build and bring about a new creation is stronger than the forces of destruction.
- "Lift up your eyes and see: They all gather, they come to you": Your own renewal is part of the coming of God's reign in our world.

Jer 31, 31-34: The New Covenant

- "I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel":

God's covenant with his people will never be abandoned; and my own vocation, to which he called me, will not be lost in spite of my failures.

- "I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts": the old law was written on tablets of stone; God's new law will be written in our hearts. It will not be imposed from outside or from above but the indwelling Spirit will guide us from within.
- "I will be their God and they shall be my people": God made Israel his own people (Ex 19 5f); this union is deepened and extended to all, to be fulfilled in the final glory (Rev 21, 3).
- "They shall all know me from the least of them to the greatest": also my knowledge of God will not be second hand; it is God's gift to all, to me.

Ez 36, 22-36: Israel's renewal among the nations.

- "The nations will know that I am the Lord when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes": Israel's renewal will be a witness to the nations; so will all life be that comes from God. "Let your light shine before people" (Mt 5, 16).
- "I shall clean you from all uncleanness": God will not only forgive, but take away sin and give new life.
- "A new heart I will give you and a new spirit I will put within you": the people will be renewed not by new laws but by sharing in God's own life.
- "And you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers". the inner renewal will bear fruit in the renewal of society, of the world.

2. *Jesus' invitation*

Jesus' message of God's reign, of the new heart and the new community of brothers and sisters, is being unfolded in the second week of the Spiritual Exercises. In this meditation we turn to some of the warnings attached to his message. Read the following texts attentively.

- “If your right eye causes you to sin, pluck it out...” (Mt 5, 29f). God’s kingdom demands clear and often hard decisions. Jesus rejects half-hearted compromises.
- “Someone said to him: Lord, will those who are saved be few? He said to them: strive to enter by the narrow door...” (Lk 13, 23): Jesus does not answer questions of curiosity. His message is a call to commitment, to basic decisions which may run contrary to the views and expectations of the majority.
- The unclean spirit who had been driven out “brings with him seven other spirits more evil than himself, and they enter and dwell there...” (Mt 12,43-45): Jesus rebukes the Pharisees who glory in their righteousness, but in their self-righteousness they are worse than before. Any form of self-righteousness before God is the sin most radically opposed to God’s kingdom.
- The parable of the talents: “To everyone who has, more will be given and he will have abundance; but from him who has not, even what he has will be taken away” (Mt 25,14-30): the parable speaks of our responsibility and accountability for the gifts we receive from God. The new creation is God’s gift entrusted to us. Those who respond go on growing. Those who do not respond go on losing.

3. *The new life in Jesus Christ* (Eph 4,23-5,2).

This is the vision of the new life which comes from God in Jesus Christ:

- “Be renewed in the spirit...Put on the new nature”: Conversion is a radical renewal from within.
- “Putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth, for we are members one of another”: God’s reign is community in truthfulness and love.
- “Be angry but do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil”: anger is a necessary, often constructive reaction to

evil. It is at the same time a source of frequent sin and of serious disturbance. Have I learned to channel anger into a constructive power in my life and work?

- “Let the thief do honest work with his hands so that he may be able to give to those in need”: this is the radical reversal from taking to giving, from sinful greed to loving sharing.
- “Let no evil talk come out of your mouths but only such as is good for edifying”: our language betrays our heart. A new heart filled with Jesus’ spirit will have words that make for community. (cf Jas 3,1-13).
- “Let all bitterness, wrath and anger... be put away from you”: compare these poisoned attitudes to the gifts of the Spirit in Gal 5, 22f.
- “Walk in love as Christ loved and gave himself for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God”: God’s kingdom is the community of self-giving love which is rooted in Jesus’ total self-gift to God, to us.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Ez 37, 1-14: The vision of the valley of the dry bones which are brought to life.
- Lk 7,36-47: The sinful woman is received by Jesus.
- Lk 15: The three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin, the lost son.
- Rom 6,5-11: Dead to sin, alive to God.
- Rev 22, 1-5: The stream of living water that heals the nations. (cf Ez 47,1-12).

QUESTIONS

1. What are the areas in which I need the healing power of Jesus?
2. In what areas do I need a breakthrough, a new outlook and commitment?
3. How do I plan the ongoing renewal of my life in the future?

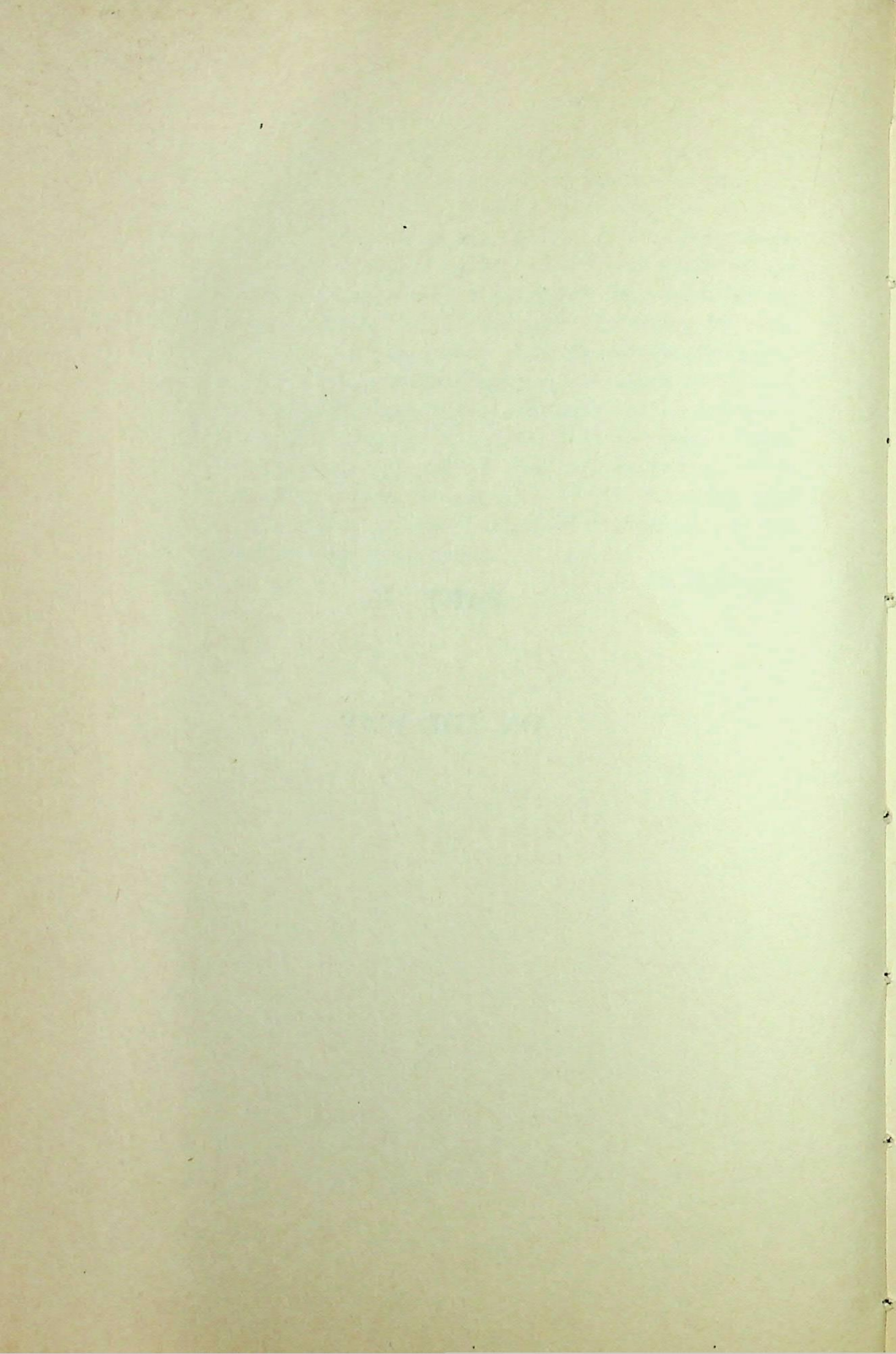
FOR REFLECTION:

O God of magnanimity and love, ever ready to give, even to waste your blessings, have mercy on my heart. Fill this poor heart of mine with your Holy Spirit that transforms it. May this Spirit burn into my dead heart the fear of your judgements so that I wake up from the rigour of death and shake off the paralysis of resignation and hopelessness. May he make me humble and contrite and fill me with the desire for your holiness, the trust in your power. May he give me the repentance which is the beginning of heavenly life and the confidence in the invincible strength of your assistance, which can make hearts fresh and vibrant, joyful and bold in your service. Only if you give me your grace I shall truly know how much I need it, only your mercy makes it possible to confess that I am a sinner, only your love gives me the courage to hate my sin without drifting into despair.

(KARL RAHNER).

PART II

ON THE WAY



JESUS, MY LORD

"All things are delivered to me by my Father (Mt 11,27).

The meditation on Jesus Christ stands by itself in the Spiritual Exercises, between the first and the second week. It leads to the central theme not only of the retreat but of the entire Christian life. God wants that this broken world of ours be renewed through Jesus his Son and so become the new creation, his own kingdom. Even more: Jesus is not only a remedy for our sick world, but in him God tells us what man is really meant to be in his plan, our human life with its struggle and death and with its ultimate destiny, in God: "In these last days God has spoken to us through a Son." In the destiny of man the meaning of all creation is summed up. Through Jesus Christ it will be included in God's love: "God made Jesus heir of all things; through him he created the world" (Hebr. 1,2).

The Personal Encounter with Jesus

Thus the Christian message does not consist in a doctrinal system but is contained in the person of Jesus. Seeing him means encountering God (cf. Jn 14,9). In him, according to the words of the Council, "revelation is completed, perfected and confirmed with divine guarantee. He did this by the total fact of his presence and self-manifestation, by words and works, signs and miracles, but above all by his death and glorious resurrection from the dead, and finally by sending the Spirit of truth" (Dei Verbum n. 4).

The following weeks of the Spiritual Exercises will be spent on the meditations on Jesus Christ, his life and message. To do this we need, to be sure, a safe basis of historical knowledge and critical assessment of the biblical texts. However, this historical knowledge should be acquired independently of the Spiritual Exercises. In these weeks of the retreat we are concerned with the person of Jesus Christ who is "the Way, the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14,6). This personal encounter with Jesus must take place in our own world and situation. It is meant to become the transforming inspiration and power of our life.

The greatest obstacle in our encounter with Jesus is our familiarity with him. We think we know him. As children already we have learnt from our parents to believe in him. We have read the gospels, and heard them read, a hundred times. We know the ancient formulas by which the Councils define him: true God and true man. Daily we pray to him in the liturgy and in meditation. Surely Jesus is the most familiar figure in our spiritual household. But so it may have happened that we never really met him personally, never were challenged by him.

It was different with his first disciples: Sometimes we may envy them for their unique privilege of having been with him at the lake of Galilee and having been allowed to listen to his words, and we might imagine that it must have been easy for them to find personal faith in him. This is surely not true. Try to live with them through their experience.

Jesus exercises a powerful attraction on the people. They were drawn to him by the way he spoke about his Father with an absolute assurance that our life is sheltered in his care; by his love for the people, for all, even those who had lost all hope; by his call to a new communion among all men and women as brothers and sisters, in the love of God. He had the power to heal body, mind and spirit. In his presence the entire world seemed changed, the daily worries appeared small, people flocked to him from the villages, they forgot their meals and followed him into deserted places. He was truly "anointed with the Holy Spirit and with power, and went about doing good and healing... God was with him" (Acts 10,37f). Whatever he spoke was simple, real; it all came

from the depth of his being and had the unmistakable ring of truth, that unique truth which comes only from God and touches every heart, which does not need arguments but must be accepted in trusting faith. They began to see what true life is, what we all are meant to be.

But the leading circles of the Jews turned against him. They felt threatened. The politicians were disturbed on account of the mass-movement among the people whose expectations always had a political bent. They were apprehensive of the Roman authorities who might tighten their military control.

Also religious minded people were disturbed: What was the authority of this man to speak about matters of tradition and law? He never quoted any of the great rabbis who were renowned for their knowledge of the Torah. He spoke only on his own authority without any academic preparation or official sanction. The trends of his teaching seemed dangerous: all considered the strict observation of the Sabbath a mark of faithfulness towards the law. Jesus had very liberal ideas about it and provoked open conflicts when he healed people during the Sabbath service in the synagogue as if he were the Lord of the Sabbath. He spoke lightly about ritual purity concerning food and other injunctions as if only the purity of the heart were important. He welcomed sinners, shared meals with tax-collectors and declared that there was greater joy in heaven for a converted sinner than over all the faithful observers of the law. His conception of God's absolute love and of the common brotherhood of all was a threat to their feelings of superiority and to their power position in society.

Could one man stand against the entire sacred tradition of the past, one against all others, politicians, scholars, religious leaders? Soon it became evident that Jesus was isolated. A handful of disciples still went with him fascinated by his personality. But when his defeat became evident they too abandoned him, and he was alone. His enemies still gave him a last chance when he was hanging on the cross: if he was the Messiah... God would surely save him: "Let the Christ, the King of Israel, come down now from the cross that we may see and believe" (Mk 15,32). Nothing happened, and he

himself confessed: according to the gospels "My God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15,34).

Do you still feel that it would have been easier to follow Jesus in his earthly life, easier than today? Would you have been the only disciple who, along with Mary his mother, remained standing under the cross, the disciple whom Jesus loved? Truly, it seems almost impossible to stand alone against the whole world: political power, public opinion, religious authority, and just to believe in Jesus, the Son of God, with no other argument except his word, his person.

Today many find it easy to believe in Jesus because they do not encounter him in person; without much thinking they repeat the formula of the Creed. It would not be so easy if also today we were ready to feel his challenge.

Jesus came to proclaim and inaugurate the kingdom of God, a new world and a new human society, different from this broken world of ours which is full of division and oppression, as we have made it with our selfish and sinful hearts. Jesus offers an alternative, the only real alternative to our society: how God has seen our world, how we have to live our life personally and in mutual communion. Are we ready to accept Jesus and to listen to his call?

Thus, to find Jesus it is not enough to study, to remain in the realm of concepts. Concepts insulate truth and protect us from its impact; with our concepts we can safely handle the most dangerous realities: we can speak about life and death, world and eternity without danger, just as we can handle the deadly electric currents that come from the power-house without danger of an electric shock, if only we take care of effective insulation. We have been used to keep a safe distance when we read the gospels and study theology. So we could speak about Jesus as if we knew him, without danger, because we met him only in the well protected sphere of liturgy and doctrine. We must again find him, his person. This is the meaning of the three following weeks of the Spiritual Exercises to encounter the person of Jesus, to be open to his impact, without protection, ready to allow his power and light to flow into our life and to transform it.

The Meditations of This Day

In the meditations of this day, and through the following three weeks, the goal of the Spiritual Exercises is firmly kept in mind. Ignatius wishes that the preparatory prayer before each meditation remains the same: "that all my intentions, actions, works be directed purely to the praise and service of his Divine Majesty" (n. 46). This prayer, however, will be more concrete in the meditations of Jesus' life because the praise and service of God is realized through our union with Jesus Christ. Thus, in these meditations we ask "for an intimate knowledge of our Lord who has become man for me, that I may love him more and follow him more closely" (n. 104). Knowledge, love and service are the triad of the personal commitment to Jesus. Knowledge in biblical language is more than the intellectual grasp of an object; it means the personal encounter, leading to love, which, in its turn, does not consist in words or emotions but expresses itself in deeds, in service. (cf. n. 230).

This day is meant to lead to a deep awareness of Jesus' unique place in God's plan of salvation and to inspire the retreatant to a wholehearted commitment to him and to his mission. To prepare him for this commitment, Ignatius uses the parable of an earthly king chosen by God who calls his people to a crusade against the infidels. He applies this parable to Jesus Christ who is sent by his Father to conquer the powers of darkness and sin in this world and calls his followers to join him in this struggle (nn. 91-100).

As this parable reflects the distant era of a feudal age, it may be easier for us to remain on biblical grounds and to contemplate Jesus' person and mission in a global and comprehensive manner as it is presented in the gospels to inspire us to a radical commitment to Jesus.

The first encounter with Jesus (Jn 1,29-31).

"The next day John saw Jesus coming towards him". Live through this hour with John who had been waiting for the Messiah, preparing the people and his disciples. It is the hour of fulfilment.

It is also the hour of surrender: on the following day two of his disciples go over to Jesus; soon he realizes his own decline: "He must increase, I must decrease" (Jn 3,30).

So is also my encounter with Jesus. Ancient longings for the Saviour, for 'Emmanuel' are waking up in my heart. Will Jesus fulfil them, what will be his demands on me? I first greet him with John's words: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world". My sinful life will be renewed, our broken world will be healed.

Jesus, the prophet

The Synoptics spell out Jesus' mission in more concrete terms. His prophetic proclamation is summed up, according to Mark, in four brief lines:

"The time is fulfilled,
the reign of God is at hand,
repent,
and believe the Good News."

Jesus' coming is indeed the decisive hour, the time of searching and waiting is fulfilled, the new creation dawns. Jesus calls the new creation the reign of God. The later prophets had spoken about the era of God's reign as a realm of righteousness, justice and peace. They had seen it in the great vision of the holy city of peace, where God will "gather those who have been driven away", and we, his people "will walk in the name of the Lord our God for ever and ever", because "the Lord will reign over them in Mount Sion" (Mic 4,5-7).

Of this reign of God Jesus says that it is "*at hand*", in the coming, not yet established but already present. It is not a dream of future glory but takes place in our world, in families, villages, among the people in actual life. It will not fall from heaven as a miracle but has to be realized in every human heart, in our human community, and from there it will flow from person to person to renew and transform human society in its many spheres of culture, economics, politics.

Thus the prophets never spoke about God's reign without a call to *repentance*, to a change of heart. The expectation of

God's reign was not allowed to become a soothing dream. The prophets denounced injustice and exploitation (e.g. Amos 2,6-8), and destroyed the illusion that through sacred rituals in the temple they could find God's favour (e.g. Is, 1,12-17). John the Baptizer had taken up the prophetic message in his call to repentance. He challenges the people not to blame outside enemies for their misfortune. Israel, God's own people, has to be renewed. As a sign of earnestness they are called upon to accept the baptism of repentance because the very essence of their vocation is at stake: "The axe is laid to the root of the tree" (Mt 3,10).

Thus also Jesus calls men to repentance. The new creation, God's reign, will not come as a sensational manifestation of power from heaven but must blossom in human hearts. Still, there is a difference in Jesus' preaching: he has reversed the sequence in his demands: God's reign stands first before repentance. Jesus' message is Good News, the coming of the new creation. It is coming in love, it will not be forced on anyone, but it must be received and realized in our life, personal and social. It must become the beginning of a new creation, which is at once God's gift and our task. Jesus' proclamation ends with the call to *believe the Good News*, to open our hearts to God's coming.

Jesus as teacher

This prophetic message of Jesus must be explained as it has its implications in all spheres of life and society. Thus Jesus is not only the prophet but also the teacher. In Mark's narration of Jesus' public life the first scene takes place in Capernaum: "And immediately on the Sabbath he entered the synagogue and taught" (Mk 1,21). Nothing is said about the content of his teaching, but Mark points out its characteristic note: "They were astonished at his teaching, for he taught them as one who has authority, not as the scribes" (Mk 1,22). Also the scribes had authority among the Jews, the authority of scholars who knew their sources and were able to quote other rabbis to confirm their opinions. Jesus was different. He never relies on any authority. Even the Scriptures he quotes with sovereign freedom: "The men

of old have been told...But I say to you" (Mt 5,21-48). He speaks from the depth of his consciousness. "We speak what we know" (Jn 3,11). All words of Jesus have the ring of truth, his simple teaching, his conversations, the controversies, the parables. It is our lifelong task to listen to Jesus' authentic teaching.

Jesus, the master

Jesus is more than teacher, he is master. He has not 'students'—they learn from their teachers—but 'disciples', who allow their lives to be formed and transformed by their master. This was the experience of all of Jesus' disciples: Their background and education were poor, and their humble social status as fishermen held no promises. Yet from the outset the gospels see them in a new perspective. Jesus calls them with a promise: "I will make you become fishers of men" (Mk 1,17). Whoever comes into contact with Jesus receives a new identity, a new horizon for his life and work. Jesus invites them to share in his own mission.

Jesus, the friend

Even more, Jesus calls them friends: "You are my friends if you do what I command you". This friendship implies total trust. A servant carries out errands but does not share in the master's plans and intentions. Jesus keeps no secret from his disciples, he shares with them his message, the very purpose of his life and work: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15,14f). Jesus is conscious of the risk involved in this trust: one of his disciples became a traitor. He also realized the slowness of their understanding, the lack of depth in grasping the real meaning of his words, the unreliability of their attachment, the wordly outlook and the personal ambitions prevailing in their minds and hearts. Still, he trusts them. It is a trust which lasts through the centuries of the Church's mission, as long as Jesus' messengers proclaim his word. It is the incredible risk which he takes in entrusting his message to human beings.

Perhaps some feel it would have been safer to entrust it to a book (as Mohammed did). But it is the very essence of God's reign that it is to be realized by men and women and proclaimed by Jesus' disciples, by those he calls his friends.

Jesus Prays

Jesus can take his risk because his work and mission are sheltered in God's own power. This is Jesus' prayer for his own: "I have given them the words which you gave me... they have believed that you didst send me... I am praying for them, for those whom you have given me: Holy Father, keep them in your name... that they may be one... keep them from the evil one... sanctify them in the truth... I consecrate myself that they also may be consecrated in truth" (Jn 17,6-19). Jesus prays to the Father for the ultimate guarantee of truth and unity, the Holy Spirit: "I will pray the Father and he will give another counsellor, to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14,16f).

Jesus, Our Life

John's gospel reflects the intimate, lasting union with Jesus Christ as it was experienced in the community of believers. During his earthly life Jesus had invited the disciples to come, to see, to follow, to believe. The Christian community realizes a deeper union: "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me... Abide in my love." (Jn 15,4-11). It is the union which we celebrate day by day in the Eucharist. We have the assurance "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Mt 28,20).

This, then, is the meaning of the meditations of this day: to encounter Jesus Christ and to realize his world-wide mission. The new creation has become visible, real in him. It must be realized now, in our world, through his disciples.

Thus we are called to a commitment, a new life and a new vision: a world renewed and united in God's love, in Jesus Christ.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The first disciples according to John* (Jn 1,35-51).

Live once more through this hour in John's life, as he points at Jesus, the Lamb of God, and how he sees the two disciples leaving him and following Jesus.

- "What do you seek?": it seems a trivial question, just to start a conversation. Yet it is the basic question of their life—of my life, of every life.
- "Where are you staying?": again a common place question of the disciples, yet it is the question of their discipleship: where will they find him? where shall I find him? in books? sacraments? neighbour? I need the personal encounter.
- "Come and see": this simple answer contains keywords of the Gospel. There is no way of finding Jesus but to follow him in actual life. Neither study nor activities lead to Jesus unless the commitment to him is borne out in true discipleship; the more we follow Jesus the more we shall see.
- "Andrew...found his brother Simon. He brought him to Jesus." the new community is being formed, the growing cell, through human contacts, to become Christ's body.
- "You shall be called Cephas": Each one who follows Jesus receives a new destiny, a new name (cf. Rev 2,17).

2. *Knowing Jesus.* (Mt 11, 25-30; Lk 10, 21)

What is the disposition required to come to know Jesus?

- Matthew gives as background to the text Jesus' lament over the cities who have not received him. (Mt 11,20-24); Luke gives as immediate occasion the joyful return of the seventy after their first proclamation of the Good News, with the victory over the powers of evil. (Lk 10,17-20). Why is the reception of the gospel so different?

- “Father, you have hidden these things from the wise”: from those who know already, do not want to learn, have their own fixed expectations of God’s reign (political, eschatological, etc), measure Jesus by their own ideas and reduce God’s word to the framework of their plans. People at all times are tempted to do so and thus become deaf to his message.
- “You have revealed it to little ones”: to children in the sense of the bible: whose mind is not yet programmed; people who are open to truth and wonder; who do not rely on their own resources, do not calculate, are still able to receive gifts of love, God’s own love.
- “All things are delivered to me”: Jesus has no secular power, but God’s reign of love, embodied in him, will outlast earthly empires.
- “No one knows the Son except the Father”: People could see Jesus and listen to him, but no one can fathom the depth of his person without God’s light. To Peter, who confesses him as Messiah, Jesus replies: “Not flesh and blood have revealed this to you but my Father who is in heaven” (Mt 16,17).
- “No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son reveals him”: Through Jesus we are called to enter the inner life of God, what God is, what he is to us.
- “Come to me all who labour . . . I will give you rest”. Jesus offers the Sabbath rest, the ultimate assurance and peace beyond travail and anxieties, work and struggle, the dawn of the new creation, of God’s reign.
- “My burden is light : Jesus does not add burdens of the law. His only commandment is love.

OTHER READINGS:

- Phil 3, 1-14: Jesus Christ is the only support of the life and mission of his disciples.

- Eph 1, 15-2:10 The grace to know Jesus Christ.
- 1 Jn 1,1-4: God reveals himself in Jesus Christ.
- Coll 12-23: Jesus Christ the centre of creation.

QUESTIONS:

1. Reflect on Jesus' many titles: Which of them is most meaningful for you?
2. How shall I be able to deepen my knowledge of, and my commitment to Jesus Christ?

A PRAYER OF SELF OFFERING TO JESUS CHRIST

"Eternal Lord and king of all creation, humbly I come before you. Aware of the support of Mary, your mother, and all your saints, I am moved by your grace to offer myself to you and to your work. I deeply desire to be with you in accepting all wrongs and all abuse and all poverty, both actual and spiritual, and I deliberately choose this, if it is for your greater service and praise. If you, my Lord and king, would so call and choose me, then take and receive me into such a way of life".

Paraphrase of St. IGNATIUS' prayer for this day.

JESUS OUR BROTHER

"When the time was fulfilled, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4, 4).

Jesus is the beginning of the new creation. How will this new world come about? How will God establish his reign?

For the Jews of Jesus' time the coming of God's kingdom was part of their faith, a faith that was never shaken. In spite of decay and the disasters of their history they were sure of God's faithfulness. Jerusalem will be the city of peace to which the nations will flock. (cf. Is 2,1-4).

How the Jews expected God's Kingdom

The coming of the kingdom was conceived in two opposite ways: many pinned their hope on a political upheaval, an armed revolt, through which the foreign rule of the Romans would be overthrown and the national sovereignty of God's own people over and against the pagan nations restored. Through all his life Jesus is surrounded and challenged by these expectations.

Different was the expectation expressed in the apocalyptic writings which abounded at the time of Jesus: God's reign was seen as the end of all history. The book of Daniel had already indicated the pattern of this expectation in the interpretation

of Nebuchadnezzar's dream of the statue of gold, silver, bronze, iron and clay, which was smashed by a stone from above. Just as the stone smashed the statue, so "the God of heaven will set up a kingdom which will never be destroyed. . . it shall break in pieces all these kingdoms and bring them to an end, and it shall stand for ever" (Dan 2,44). This is the apocalyptic expectation: human history will not be redeemed. It goes its way of decay and will be destroyed, but over the ruins of a destroyed world God's eternal kingdom will be established.

Both expectations had in common the theme of faithfulness in fulfilling the law, if Israel is loyal in the observance of the law, God will renew his people.

Jesus belongs to his people and is affected by their hopes and aspirations. His message, the understanding of God's reign in his preaching, contains elements of both trends, but is distinctly his own. The political model was based on the firm conviction that God's reign must be realized in our world. The prophetic vision of the new Jerusalem (Is 2,1-4, Micah 4, 1-6; Is 60,1-7) is not an utopian dream but it means a better world of harmony with nature and of peace among the nations. Jesus also proclaims a world redeemed, a new community of brothers and sisters. But the danger, the actual distortion of the political conception of God's reign lies in its identification with a concrete national and political structure. The Jews at Jesus' time identified God's kingdom with the revival of national sovereignty and the triumph over the nations. In the Middle Ages the Church attempted to realize it through the dominion over all secular powers. The same temptation and distortion still lingers in her reliance on institutional support, financial security and political influence; none of which figures in Jesus' own proclamation of God's reign.

The apocalyptic expectation, on the other hand, is based on the deep awareness that God alone can bring about the new creation. The bible knows Yahweh as the God who gives life, who tells the down-trodden people: "I will open your graves. . . I will bring you home into the land of Israel"

(Ez 37,12). These apocalyptic visions saw the restoration of Israel no longer as part of our history. God's reign comes only on the ruins of the present world because, so they felt, this world of ours cannot be redeemed. It will be destroyed and out of its ashes God's kingdom will rise.

This conception of God's reign implies a failure on the part of God. If he were to create a new world, which would replace this world of ours, he would write off his first creation of which it had been said in the beginning that "it was good." Our world is God's work which cannot be abandoned.

And further: could God save man and our world without our own involvement? He created us in freedom and placed our life and future into our hands; this is our unique dignity above all other creatures. If God were to bring about a new creation alone, bypassing our freedom, it would not truly be salvation, restoring human wholeness; it rather would be a declaration of human bankruptcy. It would be a work of power, a triumphant victory over darkness, but it would not be a work of love. Man would stand humiliated, deprived of his dignity to shape his own destiny.

The Incarnation

What, then, is God to do? Only God can heal, renew and fulfil our human life and this world of ours. But this saving work of God is the work of his love—he *loved* the world—and love can never destroy. It cannot humiliate man. "He will not break the bruised reed or quench the dimly burning wick" (Is 42,3). Thus salvation will be God's own work, more so even than the work of creation. And still it must be also the achievement of man. How will this be possible?

The *meditations* of this day are not meant to lead to theological speculations; rather should they be the silent contemplation in wonder and love of God's unique gift to us: "He so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (Jn 3,16). Let them be centred on the words of Paul where he speaks about the incarnation:

"When the time was fulfilled
God sent forth his son,
born of a woman,

born under the law,
to redeem those who were under the law,
so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4,4).

When the time was fulfilled

Of what time does Paul speak? Is there a time on earth which offers better opportunities for God's work of salvation?

In Palestine, where Jesus is born, it is a time of distress: of political impotence under foreign rule, of social injustice, of religious decadence, under high-priests who used their power for family interests and political convenience. The voice of the prophets had long been silent, it was replaced by that of the scribes who administered legal norms to the people. Jesus will have compassion on these people "because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9,36).

The wider world at Jesus' time was the Roman empire under Augustus. Peace had come to the world, but it was the peace of oppressive power, guaranteed by the iron legions of Rome; peace at the expense of freedom and dignity.

It was a world of prosperity which, however, was based on the labour of millions of slaves who were helpless though their number was more than half the population.

The timings of God's coming do not depend on events of history. No time is worthy to be blessed by God, no time is excluded from salvation. It comes in God's own time "at the date fixed by the Father" (Gal 4,2). This remains true throughout history, in every life. To find God we need not wait for special constellations of favourable circumstances, for suitable psychological or sociological conditions. Wherever we are and whatever our situation, God comes, he touches our heart and enters our life when his time has come, when his love reaches out to us.

God sent his Son

It is God's own initiative for our salvation, to heal our wounds and the wounds of our society, to establish his reign

on earth. Yet it is more than an initiative of creative power: God himself wants to be with us. His eternal life and love begin to flow through the channels of our world and society. He lives this life of ours, a human life with its joy and beauty, with its insecurity, anxiety, pain, with conflicts and rejection, with death. He is with us not as our ruler but as our brother in unbreakable solidarity.

In Jesus he shows us what it means to be man, not in the distortion of sin, in pride or fear, as we see it all around, as each one is inclined to live it, but as sons and daughters of God: Jesus lives his eternal sonship as a human being, in an earthly life. In him we see what in our life could be new and how our world could be different. We are not meant to be slaves of oppressive powers neither from outside nor from within. In spite of poverty and weakness we can be free and live a life of love. In Jesus we also see that this freedom is not an illusion but God's promise. Even when Jesus seems to be drowned in the darkness and hatred of the world, when he dies, he remains God's Son. He has the assurance of eternal life, he will rise.

Born of a woman

Jesus' earthly life begins in the poverty of Bethlehem as a helpless child. Old theology often attributed to Jesus special prerogatives: as he was Son of God he must have had extraordinary knowledge even as a baby. Such conceptions are not borne out by the biblical accounts. It was the very meaning of his coming that he should be our brother and live our human life with all its limitations. He truly "emptied himself" (Phil 2,7), and "though he was rich, for your sake he became poor (2 Cor 8,9). He was the child of poor parents and grew up as a village boy. His first life experience was that of rural Palestine, and his religious world was that of pious Jews. What stands out in his consciousness, however, as far as we can trace it through the gospel accounts, is his unique closeness to God his Father. It accompanies him throughout his life. He called God "*Abba*". This is a word that children speak to their father, an address devoid of all liturgical solemnity, never used by Jews in praying to God.

It expresses an intimacy which was entirely new, and so it remained untranslated in the Gospels (Mk 14, 36). It is the core of his being: Son of God, but now living his sonship in the limitations of his human life: born of a woman.

Born Under the law

In the actual context of the epistle to the Galatians Paul speaks of the Jewish law, the religio-social world of Israel based on the covenant. This is the framework of Jesus' life, which he accepts, in which he lives, which he brings to perfection. Every human life is shaped by its social surroundings and must develop within a concrete cultural milieu, which means both an enrichment and a limitation: it offers the opportunity of growth and the challenge of a critical encounter with the surrounding world; but it also narrows the horizon of human possibilities to one culture and to a short period of human history and development. Thus Jesus lives as a Jew, in the cultural and social setting of the distant past of Israel. This is part and parcel of the incarnation. He must live his life and fulfil his mission within these limitations.

But how then is Jesus' life and mission relevant to people of other times and cultures? How can Jesus speak to modern people?

To redeem those who were under the law

This is the meaning of Jesus' life and message: to redeem his own people, to redeem all men. Redeeming means breaking fetters, setting free, restoring the fulness of life. Every person is in need of redemption, of breaking out of the prison and bondage imposed on him through society in a thousand bonds of dependence of body, mind, heart, to live his true life in its three dimensions: before God, with fellow men in society, in the surrounding world.

Jesus lived his life and fulfilled his mission in the narrow world of Palestine, yet in *freedom*. This is the most characteristic feature of his personality: He is totally himself, assured, fearless, not dependent or relying on material resources, on people

or on their attitude towards him. Whether Jesus is loved and acclaimed, or rejected and condemned, he is always himself, authentic, with an indestructable assurance in his decisions. He is sure of his Father in heaven and of his mission for the people on earth—love of God, brother of all.

In this freedom Jesus is more than a Jew: he belongs to all people. He does not adopt other cultures, nor does he wipe out social differences, but he shows how we all can be truly human in every culture and social setting. He has this freedom because his life is rooted in his Father. Man can be truly free only if he has his roots in God's absolute power and love.

So that we might receive adoption as sons

Full redemption implies many dimensions of our life: economic security, social acceptance, removal of psychological blocks which prevent true growth and free relations to others. All this has to be taken care of, yet all this is secondary; it actually would be worthless if the core of our whole being were not redeemed. I must be accepted by God, renewed in his love. My life must be sheltered in him, the ultimate truth, power and love, because I need the assurance that my life is precious and rich and holds a promise of fulfilment. I am tied in this earthly life, in spite of the narrow borders that surround me on all sides and limit the horizons of my vision and my actions.

This is Jesus' gift: I belong to God, we are sons and daughters of God because he became our brother to make us share in his sonship. So Jesus makes us also members of a new community of brothers and sisters which is based not on natural ties of family or cultural closeness, but on the common sonship of God. This is God's kingdom, comprising all cultures and ages.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. "*God so loved the world*". (Jn 3, 16-21).

This is John's vision of Jesus' coming:

— "*God loved the world*": Do we really believe it?

Many feel that God, if he exists at all, is infinitely distant from our world while our life goes its own way. Others, spiritual people, have in their mind the image of an angry God who must be pacified and Jesus reconciles him. But Paul tells us that it was not God who was reconciled, rather we are reconciled to God through Jesus (cf. 2 Cor 5, 18). God's love alone is the lifspring of our salvation.

- "He gave his only Son": The eternal bond of love, that unites the Father to his Son, is extended to us, that we be included in this love, that with Jesus as our brother we too become sons and daughters; he gives Jesus to us that he should share in our life, and we in his.
- "Not to condemn the world": Light dispells darkness, love redeems hatred, life awakens death. Jesus' coming is the crisis of the world, we feel threatened, "men loved darkness better than light". Yet love never condemns, it redeems; those who do not open their heart to the light condemn themselves: "He who does not believe is already condemned".
- "That whoever believes in him...has eternal life": In believing we open mind and heart to his light; we become disciples and allow him to transform us. His divine life, his life in the Father, begins to penetrate our being, becomes our own life with no limit or end.
- "He who does what is true, comes to the light": Thus Jesus is Saviour. Yet he does not dispense us from our free commitment, from doing what is true. This doing is not proud self-righteousness but the response to God's love, the covenant of God's love with human freedom.

2. *Jesus, our brother.*

Four texts from the Letter to the Hebrews.

- Jesus is God's final *revelation*: "In these last days God has spoken to us in a Son" (1,2): In Jesus Christ God

has spoken. He has given himself to us in irrevocable love. In him he also unfolds for us the meaning of our human life. Our world is included in God's love.

- Jesus is our *brother*: "He is not concerned with angels but with the descendants of Abraham. Therefore he had to be made like his brethren... Because he himself has suffered and been tempted, he is able to help those who are tempted" (2,14-18).
- *The compassionate high priest*: "We have a high priest... who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sinning. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace" (4,14-16). The priest is mediator between God and man. Jesus is priest not through rituals but in his own person: He shares our struggles, yet in obedience is united to his Father: "Jesus offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death... He learned obedience through what he suffered" (5,7-10).
- *Following Jesus*: "Let us run the race... looking at Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith" (12,1-2). As Jesus is with us, so we are invited to be with him. In his strength we are able to live our life in the assurance of God's power and love.

3. *The Church in Our World.* (Vatican II, A.G. n. 11).

Read this text with a meditative mind. As Jesus is our brother and shares in our life, so the Church as sacrament of salvation, i.e. as visible sign of Christ's continued presence in our midst, must be intimately related to our world:

- through the example of Christians;
- manifesting the newness of life, the power of the Spirit;
- in respect and love of all people;
- sharing in their social and cultural life;
- familiar with the national and religious traditions;

- aware of the cultural transformations of our time, the loss of religious values;
- seeing in other religions the seeds of the Word;
- recognizing the riches God has bestowed on the nations;
- illumining these riches with the light of the gospel.

OTHER READINGS

- 1 Jn 1,1-4: God's Word made visible in Jesus Christ.
- Vatican II: Constitution on the Divine Revelation, n. 4: God's revelation in Jesus Christ.
- Vatican II: Constitution on the Church in the modern world, nn. 1-3: The Church's insertion in the world.

QUESTIONS:

1. Reflect on Jesus: in what way was he similar to us, in what way different? What does this mean in terms of inculturation for the Church, for me?
2. The Church must be incarnate in the world: what are wrong ways of "incarnation" (worldliness, mere institutional presence, etc), what is the right presence?

FOR REFLECTION

The Christian faithful who have been gathered into the Church from every nation and are not marked off from the rest of men either by country, by language or political institutions should live for God and Christ according to the honoured customs of their race. As good citizens they should sincerely and actively foster love of country and, while utterly rejecting racial hatred and exaggerated nationalism, work for universal love among men.

(*Mission Decree n. 15*).

THE MOTHER OF JESUS

"Blessed is she who believed" (Lk 1,45).

Once more we reflect on the Incarnation: it is God's gift, Jesus is sent by the Father; it includes also the human response embodied in Mary, his Mother. This day is devoted to Mary. In her we contemplate our own place in God's plan of salvation.

Mary's Place In God's Plan of Salvation

God speaks in Jesus Christ. This speaking is different from the word of creation where God is alone. Now he speaks to us. The new creation is to come about not by God alone but by God and man. It is a covenant, bridging the abyss between heaven and earth, God and man.

Also in the work of salvation God acts with sovereign power—but now it is the power of love. Love includes the partner, it never overrules, never bypasses the beloved. Love cannot help becoming dependent on him, on his freedom and response. Love, therefore, is a risk, not just one of the many risks we have to take every day when we put our foot on the highways of life and the world. Love is a total risk, because in love the very core of the person is at stake. Can God ever take a risk? Can he hand over his work of creation and salvation to human hearts and hands and entrust himself to his creatures?

God's risk begins when he creates man in freedom and allows him to take his life and destiny into his own hands, to shape the world and to build human society according to his own designs. This is the drama of creation, culture, history.

God's risk, however, becomes radical in the plan of salvation when he gives up his own Son to the world to save it not through a display of divine power but through an invitation of love.

The history of Israel, the inconclusive sequence of its responses and refusals, foreshadows this drama of salvation. It comes to its climax in Jesus. He is the new covenant, God's irrevocable gift to man.

But how will Jesus be received? Will he remain alone, or is he the beginning of a new creation? If there were no one to receive him, the revelation would be futile; it would remain, as it were, a divine monologue of God with himself. Will Jesus find a place in this world of ours where he is welcome and finds faith?

Luke tells us of the response God's word of salvation receives in our world through Mary, the first of believers. In faith and love she surrenders her life to God's saving plan. Through her the Son of God becomes a member of our human family. She allows her own life to be drawn into God's designs and to be shaped by Jesus, her Son, and by his mission. So she is also the first to have her share in his work of salvation. Vatican II sums up her vocation. "Committing herself wholeheartedly and impeded by no sin to God's saving will, she devoted herself totally, as a handmaid of the Lord, to the person and work of her Son, under and with him serving the mystery of redemption, by the grace of Almighty God" (L.G. n. 56).

Thus Mary has her place in the Church, subordinate to Jesus her Son, yet irreplaceable. She is not a mere ornament of Christian life, nor is her veneration an accidental form of popular devotion which is dispensable. She has her place already in the Gospels. True, the earliest kerygma does not speak of her as it is totally centred on the person and mission of Jesus, who is "Lord and Messiah" (Acts 2,36). But the gospels of Luke and John were written at a time when Christian

faith had matured. The life of the Christian is not only God's gift but includes also the human response. Thus Luke tells us of Mary's surrender to God's call in the Annunciation and her gradual growth towards an ever deeper understanding of her vocation until she is in the midst of the Apostles awaiting the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on the young Church (Acts 1,14). John sees her standing under the cross with the disciple whom Jesus loved, united with Jesus in the fulfilment of his mission (Jn 19,25-27).

These are not marginal additions to the Gospel message but its genuine unfolding. In her response to God's word Mary is the model of the whole Church which in continuation of her obedience, receives God's word and "keeps the faith in its entirety and purity...imitating the mother of the Lord, and so, by the power of the Holy Spirit it keeps intact faith, firm hope and sincere charity" (Lumen Gentium n. 64). Thus Mary's role as handmaid of the Lord, who commits herself freely to God and allows her life to be absorbed in the life and mission of her Son as a model of the Church, belongs to the substance of the Christian message.

There is more. The early Church saw Mary in the context of humanity's salvation: as Eve stands at the beginning of our history of sin, so Mary is the beginning of the history of salvation. The Council quotes Epiphanius: "The knot of Eve's disobedience was untied by Mary's obedience; what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith" (Lumen Gentium n. 56).

Thus Mary has also her special place in the *Spiritual Exercises*. It is their goal to give guidance in the search for God's will, to lead us to a total commitment to God free from delusions, and to realize God's plan in our actual life. Thus time and again Ignatius invites us to turn to Mary in prayer for her intercession because it is she who was unconditionally committed to God's will. In her presence we are meant to become aware of the disorientations of our heart and the deceptive allurements of the surrounding world (cf. n. 63). On this day, however, all our meditations should be centred on Mary to find in her the model and pattern of our own life in response to God's word.

Our *meditations* are based on Luke's gospel. His account of Jesus' conception and birth are written for the community of believers: Salvation comes from God and must be received with faith and love. Mary is the model of the full surrender to God. Every word in these accounts reflects the unspeakable mystery of God's encounter with his creature in the language and the symbolism of Jewish tradition. It has inspired religious art through the centuries.

In our meditation on the Annunciation we search for the spiritual message of the narration.

The Annunciation. (Lk 1, 26-38).

"God sent the angel"

Salvation is God's own work, his own gift. Yet, God sends an angel: angels are messengers. God is no longer alone as in the dawn of creation. God offers us a covenant of love, and love needs a partner. God makes himself dependent on the free response of his creature. So it will be till the end of time, so it is also in my own life. God needs our response. He invites, but he respects our freedom.

"To a city of Galilee named Nazareth"

To whom is God's message sent? What does he expect on the part of his creatures? Though God wants to establish his reign against the powers of darkness he does not seek an alliance with human power; the angel is not sent to Rome, the concentration of political and military might. Though God begins to speak his word of divine wisdom and truth, the angel is not sent to the proud centres of human learning in Greece and Egypt. Though God wants to sanctify the world and lead it to true worship in spirit and in truth, the angel is not sent to the holy city of Jerusalem where psalms are chanted and sacrifices are offered every day; salvation has nothing to do with ritual performances which have been emptied of spirit.

The angel is sent to Galilee, a backward *country* politically, culturally, spiritually, "people who live in darkness" (Is 9, 1; Mt 4, 16). to Nazareth, a village which cannot be found on any map of the ancient world. "What good can

come from Nazareth?" (Jn 1, 46). What does God really expect on the part of his creature when he comes to save us?

"To a virgin whose name was Mary"

Mary is a virgin; it is the only title attached to her name, the only explanation for her being chosen to be mother of the Saviour. In biblical language virginity means first of all faithfulness to God. Israel is called the virgin daughter of Sion as long as the people are faithful to the covenant, listen to Yahweh, and turn away from idols. The worship of the Baals of the Cananites is called adultery. This meaning of the word is kept up in the New Testament. The 144,000 of the Apocalypse, who are saved from final destruction are virgins "who follow the Lamb wherever it goes", men and women who have not stained themselves with idolatry (Apc 14,4). Paul calls on the Corinthians to remain faithful to the unadulterated gospel because he has betrothed them to Christ as "a pure virgin." Let them not be led astray "from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ, as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning" (2 Cor 11, 2f). Virginity concerns mind and heart. physical integrity and purity are its symbol.

This then, is Mary's prerogative: She is a virgin; she will not listen to other voices and allurements, only to God's angel. Her entire life and being will depend on God, she will be guided by his word. This in fact is the basic requirement of all who wish to find God's will. The Spiritual Exercises are meant to lead precisely to this singleminded attentiveness to God, not to be diverted by the multitude of voices which claim our attention.

"Hail, Favoured by God"

Thus Mary is prepared to receive the angel's message, she will respond to it wholeheartedly. This readiness, however, is not her own achievement, it is itself God's gift, the most intimate gift which God can bestow on us: the power to respond to his love. When we translate this line as "full of grace", easily a misunderstanding is created that grace is something that can be measured. Grace is a living bond of love. It is love, but not as it is hidden in the depth of God but as it becomes

creative in our heart and brings about our faithful response. It is totally God's gift, but realised in our freedom. God awakens his creature from its earthbound blindness, he moves the heart, he draws us to himself.

It is Mary's privilege that from the beginning her life is embraced by God's love, ever responsive to him. In God's design she belongs totally to Jesus who in every way is similar to us except sin. With *him* she belongs to God. He has linked her in a unique way with Jesus and his mission. She, on her part, allowed her life to be absorbed in God's love. So she will be Jesus' mother, mother of the Saviour.

It will be the experience of the retreatant that the openness of heart and the generosity of self gift, to which he/she is invited are not his/her own achievement but God's gift.

"The Lord is with you"

So she may now enter without fear into her real life as God has destined it for her, to be the mother of the Saviour. Even before the message is pronounced, she is assured of the guarantee God ever offered to his chosen ones: he will be with her. So he was with Moses (Ex 3, 12), with Gideon (Judg 6, 12), with Jeremiah (Jer 1, 8); so he will finally be with the apostles in their impossible mission to the whole world (Mt 28, 20). It is the only assurance given to all who follow Jesus.

"You will conceive in your womb and bear a Son"

This is Mary's unique privilege, to be Jesus' mother, to give the Son of God a human mind and body, to make him a citizen of this world and a member of our human family. It is the pride of every mother when she recognizes her own features in the face of her child, her own character in the child's reactions, and her voice in his first stammerings. Jesus will be her child.

Yet even in this unique privilege Mary is not alone. The conception of Jesus in her womb is only the *beginning* of his lasting presence in our world and society in and through his believers. The body of Christ, his presence in our world, will expand. All believers will become his body, his continued

presence in human society, and bear the responsibility to make his coming real and effective in our world. Thus the Church herself "by receiving the word of God in faith becomes mother" and through the fulfilment of her mission gives life to others "who are conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of God to a new and immortal life" (Lumen Gentium n. 64).

"You will call his name Jesus"

Every mother must learn, often with pain, to allow her child to grow and to live his own life. Mary too has to learn it in a unique way. Her Son has a mission which is expressed already in his name 'Jesus', which means *Saviour*. She herself has (according to Luke) to give him the name and so, as it were, ratify his destiny not to belong to her but to the people. She will experience the implications of this name when he leaves his home in Nazareth. She will set out to see him in Capernaum, the centre of his activities, but has to learn that Jesus' true family, his "mother and brethren are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8, 21). It is based not on blood relationship but on faith in him. So in fact she is the first to belong to his family, as she was the first who believed. But it is hard for her to realize that he does not belong to her. He does not belong to her, but she belongs to him. She has to give him to the world, and she will have to widen her own heart till it is as open as Jesus' heart with a love that embraces all peoples.

"He will be called Son of the Most High"

This is the title of Jesus' unique dignity, but it implies also Mary's total surrender: Jesus belongs to his Father, his loyalty is with him, not with his mother. She experiences it when at the age of twelve he remains in the temple and she asks the painful question: "Why have you done this?" Jesus has the simple answer of his only loyalty: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" But she did not understand (Lk 2, 48-51). The full impact of his obedience to God falls on her under the cross.

It takes Mary her whole life to realize the full implications of being the mother of Jesus, from her encounter with

Simeon in the temple, who speaks of Jesus' destiny to be "for the rise and fall of many" to her presence on Calvary and in the cenacle at Pentecost. Every one of her experiences draws her closer to the mystery of his person and mission. God's designs are disclosed to her in stages, in the events of Jesus' life, of her own life, in the life of the apostolic community.

"Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord"

This is Mary's surrender giving up her life to God, the security of her small world in which she is at home, her humble but assured place in her village. She surrenders herself to the unknown, to a future which is beyond her control and comprehension, with no one to guide her and to answer her questions, to God's inscrutable mystery, with no other assurance but God himself, his word.

"Let it be to me according to your word"

God's word came to her through the message of the angel; God continues to speak to her in all stages of her life. Her word of obedience is total, but as the events of her life take place it will be deepened and enriched; her marriage with Joseph — the birth of the child — the years in Nazareth — Jesus' farewell — the agony under the cross — the bliss with her Risen Son. In all these events her 'fiat' is not only repeated but tested and fulfilled till her life and love are blended with the glory of her Son. So are our commitments an ongoing surrender to God as our life unfolds. No one knows what is implied in his or her baptismal vows, in one's religious profession or priestly commitment. Each self-gift to God must be ratified in the ongoing unfolding of our life.

"The angel departed from her"

This now will be her life: She has received the angel's message, now she is left alone, to herself. The Lord is with her silent faithfulness.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Sharing God's gift. The Visitation:* (Lk 1, 39-45).

In the visit to Elizabeth the significance of the Annunciation is spelled out.

- “Mary arose and went with haste”: She is drawn into Jesus’ own mission; God’s love is present in our world, reaching out, serving.
- “She greeted Elizabeth”: Where people are touched by God their meeting has new significance. Human contacts become channels of God’s working; a simple greeting has new depth. (Look at the greetings in Paul’s letters).
- “Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit”: In the new community of believers life is shared, transformed.
- “Blessed are you among women”: Mary’s role in the plan of salvation is that of the woman. She is virgin, spouse, mother in her relation to God. She realizes the ultimate richness and depth of womanhood.
- “Blessed is she who believed”: Mary’s greatness is not based on her physical motherhood, but on her *faith*.
- “It will be fulfilled what was spoken to her”: her life, her future lies in God’s hands; he alone is the assurance of the fulfilment.

2. *Mary’s praise, The Magnificat* (Lk 1, 46-55).

God’s gift becomes a hymn of praise in Mary’s heart. It contains the great themes of Luke’s Gospel.

- “My soul glorifies the Lord”: God’s work of salvation is echoed in Mary’s heart. Her contemplation consists in encountering the God of salvation in his deeds and praising his love.
- “All generations will call me blessed”. This is God’s greatness that the creature who encounters him is not humiliated by his majesty but is raised to share in his glory.
- “Holy is his name”: In drawing creatures to himself, God loses nothing of his infinite holiness; in her most intimate relation to God Mary bows before his holiness.
- “He has shown the strength of his arm”: God’s reign begins; it consists in raising the lowly, in filling the

hungry with good things. The good News comes to the poor; those who glory in their earthly power and wealth will be scattered and go hungry.

- “As he spoke to our Fathers”: In the work of salvation the ancient promises are fulfilled: God is faithful. God is ever present in our world, “from generation to generation.” My own vocation and my trust in God are woven into the history of God’s faithfulness which starts with creation, which will last to the end.

OTHER READINGS

- Lk 1,5-25: The annunciation of John’s birth to Zachary, his doubt and punishment.
- Mt 1, 18-24: Jesus’ origin acc. to Matthew. The story of Joseph.
- Heb 11: Faith through the ages.
- Eph 1, 3-14: The mystery of God’s election.
- Vatican II; L.G., ch. VIII. especially n. 56, Mary’s place in God’s plan of salvation. n. 63 and 64: Mary, the model of the Church.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is Mary’s place in my life? Can I realize the significance of the Marian tradition of the Church beyond devotional practices? Can I learn true faith from her?
2. Has my faith been tested and challenged by my personal experiences or by my surroundings? Has it been deepened and enriched through the years or has my faith become dim and shallow?

FOR MARIAN REFLECTION:

“You came down from your throne
and stayed at my cottage door.
I was singing all alone in a corner,
and the melody caught your ear.

You came down and stood at my cottage door.
Masters are many in your hall
 and songs are sung there at all hours.
But the simple carol of this novice struck at your love.
One plaintive little strain
 mingled with the great music of the world,
and with a flower for a prize
 you came down and stopped at my cottage door."

(TAGORE, *Gitanjali* n. 49).

COMING IN POVERTY

"This will be a sign for you: You will find a child, wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (Lk 2, 12).

How will the new creation for which the world is waiting come? The Jews of Jesus' time believed in God's power and expected the miraculous revelation of his kingdom. When the Pharisees asked about its coming, their question was not concerned with its nature—they took its coming in power for granted—they merely asked about the time (Lk 17, 20). Jesus' disciples also expected a glorious revelation in power and asked for privileged positions in Jesus' kingdom, at his right and left (Mk 10, 37). When after the collapse of their hopes because of Jesus' death they encountered him anew as the Risen Lord they asked once more: "Will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?" (Acts 1, 6). Jesus was constantly confronted by a deep-rooted misconception of God's kingdom; it persisted also in the early Church and lingers on through the centuries into our own days.

This is Jesus' answer: "The kingdom of God is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will you say 'here it is' or 'there', for behold the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk 17, 21). There will be, it is true, a final manifestation of God's reign in glory, but for this ultimate coming there is no date in our calendars. It will be God's own day, "no one knows it, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father" (Mk 13, 32). But it is coming now: There will be

no harvest unless the seeds are sown in human hearts and ripen in our world. God's reign must come now, but not in a mighty display of splendour but with the silence of life; all true life comes in silence.

How then is the seed for the final harvest sown in the furrows of our world? Of this wonder Luke tells us in the Christmas story, which may claim to be the most popular story of world literature. But it is more than poetry. Every word has significance. It is our meditation of this day.

Christmas

Precisely in the beauty and popularity of this story lies its danger. Too many take it as a story belonging to a dream world. All know that this world of ours should be different: there ought to be peace, good will and joy. So for a day we behave as if we lived in a better world. We do something like a role play. We greet each other with joy and exchange Christmas cards; we share gifts and avoid clashes. If it happens that there is a war we sometimes agree on an armistice for one day — because it is not nice to kill each other on Christmas and so to spoil the feast; but tomorrow we shall continue the battle. Good business is always alert to the mood of the people and realizes the chances of profit on Christmas under the title of selfless love; it uses Bethlehem as an advertisement and accompanies profitable transactions with the tunes of carols. How many have been disillusioned with Christmas because they feel it is just not true—no one really wants a different world; at heart we remain the same, also on Christmas day.

But Christmas is a new beginning. We reflect on the three sections of Luke's account: the hard reality, its meaning, the response.

The hard reality (Lk 2, 1-7).

Luke speaks of facts. Though some of his data may be questioned as to their historical accuracy, surely he depicts the crude reality of poverty and helplessness. Mary and Joseph on their way to Bethlehem; they belong to the masses of

people whose life depends on those in power. Augustus, the emperor, decrees a census of the empire which affects millions who have to set out to be registered in their ancestral towns. They are dragged into this mass migration with which they have nothing to do, irrespective of their own needs and conditions, mere objects of a political regulation. Is there no divine providence to protect Mary in her advanced pregnancy against such arbitrary interference? No place is found for them in the inn; there is never place for poor people. She delivers her child in helpless poverty, lays him in a manger where the fodder for animals is kept and wraps him in pieces of linen. This is the way poor people have to struggle for survival.

This is the way the reign of God is coming: nothing seems to change, God seems infinitely far away, no one cares. Life, politics, business go on as ever, and there is no sign of hope for a change. Life follows its cruel course: Mary, Joseph and the child are part of this harsh and empty world.

What does all this mean? (Lk 2, 8-14).

The second part of Luke's account contains the interpretation of these facts, the wonder of God's saving love as it is celebrated by the community of believers. It is God's own interpretation. When angels speak in the gospels it means that more is needed than human understanding; we have to listen to God himself and open our hearts in faith.

The angel appears to the shepherds; they are poor, living outside the comfortable cities, illiterate, far away also from the temple and the synagogues, not very holy people, and so they are despised not only by the rich but also looked down upon by the religious elite. And yet the gospel comes *first to the poor*: this is the core of Luke's gospel. He will make it the theme of Jesus' key address in Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor" (Lk 4, 18).

The angel who speaks to the shepherds is surrounded by God's glory: in Jesus' birth God himself reveals his power and love. In ancient times the glory of God surrounded Moses the powerful leader of the Exodus; it guided the people on

their journey through the desert; it filled the wonderful temple of Solomon. But who would ever expect the glory of God to shine in this poor world of shepherds!

The Angel's message is entirely unexpected: "Today a Saviour is born to you". Can there be a *Saviour* for our world which seems so firmly established in its contrasts of rich and poor, rulers and struggling survivors? It is not a dream, he is *born*. And he is born *for you*, the poor, who seem to be entirely forgotten. He is born *today*, in this hour of night, in the tiredness of their lonely watch.—This message of God's saving presence among us remains true for all times. It is proclaimed and celebrated in every Christian community at Christmas, it is true every day.

They need a sign. All believing Jews expected signs for the coming of God's reign; they looked out for wonders or frightening events. The sign God offers in Bethlehem is different: "This will be a sign for you: You will find a child, wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger". This is not power but weakness; it is not frightening but inviting! Is it a sign at all? Children and poverty are a sign of our helplessness. How can they signify the dawn of salvation?

This is God's new way of speaking to us. Prophets had spoken powerful words, threats of disaster, glorious visions of a new Jerusalem. We need such words to awaken us; even Jesus himself will challenge us with his hard denunciations of evil and with his inspiring words of assurance and promise. But at Bethlehem God does not speak with words; he speaks in his Son, in this child. His Son Jesus begins to live a human life, our human life. He lives it not in the disfigured form which he finds in his surroundings, which we see all around, far from God, relying on money, social status and political power, where neighbours watch each other with envy. Jesus is different: He is the Son of his Father, and brother to all; his reliance is not on money or power but on God alone; he will not dominate but invite all people to reconciliation, brotherhood and community. This child of Bethlehem is the sign, the beginning of a new humanity, not yet programmed for a particular role in society, not yet entangled in the network of a competitive society. He is simply a child, unprotected,

helpless, yet the future belongs to him, "appointed heir of all things" (Hebr 1, 2). He is the dawn of the new creation.

A multitude of the heavenly host appears praising God: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased". Heaven opens over this child, his coming has world-wide dimensions. Where is God's glory in all creation if it is not summed up and turned into praise through man? The heavens and stars could not proclaim God's glory if it were not echoed in human hearts, in God's children, who in Jesus are born to a new life. And if God is the centre and source of human life, they will be brothers and sisters again, and there will be peace on earth.

The response (Lk 2, 15-20).

"Let us go over to Bethlehem". The Gospel account widens. The shepherds represent the millions of all times and nations who are drawn to Jesus. What do they expect? Popular imagination in a deep insight into the mystery of Christmas, sees the shepherds bringing gifts to the child. Salvation does not mean receiving gifts. It is the awakening to God's love, to receive his love and to share it.

"They made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child". They become messengers. Those who respond to God's word and follow the invitation must share it.

"Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart". This is Mary's contemplation: it does not take her away from the realities of her life and from her tasks. She lives her life and responds to its demands, both joyful and painful and often surprising. In them she encounters God's love and will. So she grows ever deeper into the unfathomable mystery of God.

"The shepherds returned glorifying and praising God". The Church is a community of praise. In the Old Covenant God was praised for his mighty deeds in Israel; in the New Testament we praise him for the coming and the work of salvation of Jesus his Son. Day by day we also praise him for the events in our own life, for each one's personal history of salvation. This is the rhythm of Christian contemplation and praise: to encounter God in his deeds, as they are recorded in the Bible, as they happen in our own life, to recognize his presence and love in them, to praise him.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus' birth according to Mathew* (Mt 2, 1-12).

Also Mathew's account is a meditation. In Jesus' birth he sees the break through from national narrowness towards the universality of God's Kingdom. Political and national prerogatives are abolished. Barriers of selfishness and selfrighteousness must fall in our own day as well.

- "Wise men from the East came to Jerusalem": They represent the nations. In Luke's Gospel the message of salvation is addressed to the socially depressed; in Mathew to those outside the Jewish world.
- "Where is he who is born king of the Jews?": The ancient expectation of a new era of peace, of a Saviour-king, rings in this question. It is the question of all who are waiting for a renewed world, for the new creation.
- "We have seen his star": They were called by the sign God gave them, they were guided by the inner light of which the star is the sign. It leads them to Jerusalem, the holy city, where they expect to find the Saviour-king. Also today people come to the Church, the sacrament of salvation, to find the saviour. Do they always find him?
- "Herod was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him": Is Jerusalem no longer the city where God will establish his kingdom? Herod thinks only of his political power and is afraid of a rival. But the fear is deeper: All are afraid when God's reign dawns. It is the end of human autonomy; power is replaced by love. Where are our thrones, where is our self-righteousness? Also today we are afraid of losing positions of power and social status in the church, in society. We are afraid of our salvation.
- "They went their way, and lo, the star which they had seen in the East went before them". They follow the direction given to them by the scholars of Jerusalem,

but their inner assurance comes not from scholars but from the star God had given them: "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy when they saw the star."

- "They saw the child with Mary his mother!": it is the fulfilment of their search. Many are the insights of Eastern wisdom which they represent; Jesus does not compete with them. What these wise men seek and need is the person of Jesus born of Mary. This is the new way of God's speaking, in human life, through his Son.
- "They offered him gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh": This is our salvation, not to receive but to give, to share what we are and what we have, freed from ourselves.

2. *Poverty*

Bethlehem is the scene to reflect on poverty, in particular the poverty of the Church, of priests and religious. The many problems and aspects of this poverty must ultimately be related to the poverty of Jesus; from him we may also find orientation in our concrete questions.

Jesus encountered poverty in its many forms: the destitution of beggars, the personal helplessness and poverty of the sick, the social poverty of the rejected and marginalized, the spiritual poverty of sinners. All this poverty Jesus heals by becoming himself poor, sharing our condition. By accepting our poverty freely in love and solidarity Jesus saves us: "Though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that by his poverty you might become rich" (2 Cor 8, 9). He was rich, endowed with divine power. But becoming man he divested himself of power, his mission is based on love. This is the model of Christian poverty to be realized in the Church, and most of all in priests and religious. It must be spelled out in its various aspects:

- *Detachment*:— free from clinging to material goods or other supports on which we tend to rely for our

security; the life and mission of the Church is guaranteed by God alone.

- *Acceptance of actual situations*:— Paul knew how to be grateful for abundance and how to suffer want— food, house, surroundings, social situation, companions (cf. Phil 4,12).
- *Simplicity of life style*:— free from showiness and luxury, in personal life and in institutions.
- *Hard work*:— the lot of people at large, tiredness.
- *Availability*:— time, skills, talents, whatever is at my disposal is for the people.
- *Service*:— In my work, in my relationships, the main view point is not my individual interests but the needs of my neighbours.
- *Solidarity with the poor*:— awareness of their situation and needs, assistance in their struggle.
- *Accountability*:— responsible use of money and all things of material value; clear accounts: the middle between stinginess and lavishness.

OTHER TEXTS:

Tit 3, 1-7: God's loving kindness appeared.

John 1, 1-18: The Word was made flesh.

Vatican II, L.G, n.8c; A.G. n. 5

QUESTIONS:

1. Have I celebrated Christmas as my own birthday, the beginning of my life in Jesus Christ?
2. What is my attitude towards material resources?
3. Have I learnt to outgrow social, linguistic, national barriers?

FOR REFLECTION:

"Our poverty should be true Gospel poverty. Gentle, tender, glad and open-hearted, always ready to give an expression of love. Poverty is love before it is renunciation. To love it is necessary to give. To give it is necessary to be free from selfishness"

(from MOTHER TERESA's *Constitutions for the Missionaries of Charity*.)

THE PERSONAL VOCATION

"I will give him a white stone with a name written on the stone, which no one knows except him who receives it"
(Rev 2, 17).

The Personal Vocation

With the following meditations we enter into the decisive stage of the Spiritual Exercises, the actual search for God's will. Speaking about God's will may arouse negative feelings as if God had prepared a set of commands and decisions to impose them on us. This is not the gospel message. Already the Prophets describe the New Covenant as a time of freedom where laws will be written no longer on tables of stone but implanted into our hearts: "I will put my law within them and I will write it upon their hearts" (Jer 31,33). Jesus came to bring life, not laws: "Because I live, you will live also" (Jn 14,19). Life is not imposed, it is given, it becomes my own. It is God's will that I find true life, my life, and live it.

But life has many forms. Even in nature every flower is produced anew and has its own time to blossom and to ripen its seeds. And so it is, and much more so, with each human life. It is rich and has ever new features. We are different today from the people of the past; we are different also within our present world, using many languages and living in different cultures. Each human life is shaped by the inheritance of the past and by the social surroundings of its family and

the society in which it develops. But the difference is still deeper. Each human person is unique. The uniqueness and distinctiveness of each person cannot be reduced to the arbitrary combination of blind forces by which it is formed and by which it will be dissolved again, like the waves on the surface of the ocean, which are shaped by hidden currents, changing winds or boats passing by, without lasting identity, dissolved again into the vastness of the ocean. Waves have no names.

But before God *we have names*. Israel had a name: "Fear not, I have redeemed you, I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is 43,1). Jeremiah, the prophet, who had to go through agonies of frustration, is assured from the beginning of his mission: "Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, and before you were born I consecrated you" (Jer 1,5). In the New Testament we know that the personal love of God includes not only people of a special destiny, as the prophets, but extends to all: "God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1,4). To each one is given a new name "which no one knows except the one who receives it" (Rev 2,17).

It is the task of every one to discover his/her name, and personal identity, and to realise it in actual life, because the very meaning of one's life depends on it. The painting of an artist is more than the mixture of colours which anybody can buy in the bazaar. The arrangement of the colours, their tuning and blending together is nothing arbitrary; it is the work of love and skill of the artist. So is my life. It is more than the chance combination of genetic, psychological and social factors. What does God want of me? What is the meaning of my life, not only of human life in general but of the personal life that is mine, that is entrusted to me?

It is *entrusted to me*. It is not yet finished, it is given to me like a sketch to be completed. Shall I be able to complete it? I could spoil it and make it into a caricature. I can also misunderstand the intention of God and try to make something different out of it, according to my own ideas and ambitions. But my life will be a failure unless I grasp God's idea of it. How did he see me? I must become aware of his intentions

which are enshrined in me and be ready to set aside my own instinctive likings. I must live in deep and lasting communion with God's own creative power and love, thus only can I become truly myself.

How to Find My Personal Vocation?

How can we discover this personal vocation? We are familiar with the natural development of a person, the growth from childhood through adolescence to adulthood. Childhood is the age of dependence, of learning, of conformity with the life of the family and the wider world. The child learns to be part of the society into which it is born. However, it is meant to grow into a person and to live and unfold its own life. Already in early periods of childhood the first stirrings of self-assertion are felt, sometimes in periods of stubbornness and selfwill. The real crisis comes in adolescence, in the teens, when traditions are considered a burden which oppress personal freedom and prevent growth and authentic self-expression. Young men and women break away from existing structures and begin to shape their life and world independently. It is an age of transition, passing through insecurity with the desire for an authentic life, towards maturity. An adult is a person who has achieved his/her own identity, with the appropriate relation to world and society.

Also the life of the spirit has such stages. It begins in the Christian community, in the family and parish, with its worship, devotions and catechism classes, with its inspirations and limitations. For long years the religious praxis of many young people may be confined to such a framework even when they get married, or enter a seminary or join a noviciate. Faith and religious behaviour remain faithful to the routine of prayer, work and study in the rhythm of the institution to which they belong, according to the norms of approved and tested structures.

This is the framework in which the personal life of each one must be awakened and develop; it must come into its own and find its specific expression as a personal *response* to God, who calls each one by name and gives his life its own

features. Life thus becomes a truly personal response which cannot be imposed from outside, not even from above, nor can it be learned or copied from others. Finding our personal identity is clearly more important than choosing one's profession or career. Our identity concerns not what we do but what we are; not what people think or expect of us but what we are in God's presence. A person's identity is the life-centre from which all relations to others and all activities find meaning.

Teachers of the spiritual life call this break-through a second conversion, or the vocation within the vocation. The first conversion consists in the acceptance of the common patterns of Christian life in one of its existing forms: as member of a family, in a single life, in marriage, in priesthood, in religious life. But the time comes when we become aware of the inadequacy of a life which is based on conformism with traditional patterns. The world is more complex, life is deeper and richer, its challenges can no longer be ignored, and problems cannot be covered over by accepted formulas of the past. We have to read the signs of the time in the events and situations of our surroundings. We have to listen to the inner stirrings of the spirit. A personal response is demanded: What does God want of me?

We do not speak here of those who are disappointed with their life, Christians who gradually drift away from the Church, or religious and priests who lose the joy of their vocation. Here we think of those to whom the accustomed forms of prayer have become shallow and no longer express or fulfil the deep desire for God which stirs in the depth of their heart; of those who wish to reach out to people beyond the accepted channels in preaching, worship and activities; who face a crisis of authority, situations of unjust structures; who sense that there is a new urge of the Spirit all around us. The gospels speak of a new wine which needs new wine-skins. God's Spirit is leading us not merely by norms of the past or by orders which come from institutional authority, but also from within: where is my place in this newly emerging world? Where is God leading me? What does he want me to be and to do?

These are the questions which the retreatant has to answer, more concretely the questions for which he has to ask for an answer from God. The answer must be based on God's word, on his revelation in Jesus Christ; it must be related to the context of his actual life; it must be realized in the depth of his heart.

The Personal Vocation in the Spiritual Exercises

Two situations are foreseen in the Spiritual Exercises: the retreatant may have to make a basic decision for the state of life which he wishes to adopt, marriage, priesthood, religious life. This actually is the situation which originally is foreseen by St. Ignatius (nn. 169-189).

More frequently, however, the Spiritual Exercises are made by people who are already settled in their state of life, or at least have decided on it long ago and are engaged in their formation. They have come to a decisive stage in their life where they feel the need of a break-through to a new vision, to a deeper meaning of their vocation. For such persons two steps will now be important.

First, it will be very helpful for them to review and assess the decisions they have made earlier. Thus a religious who goes through the Spiritual Exercises in preparation for final vows will normally not question the earlier decision to become a religious; or seminarians who prepare themselves for ordination in most cases will make the retreat with the assumption that their vocation to the priesthood has been sufficiently tested (though at times a radical revision may be needed). Still, a serious assessment will be very important in order to deepen the understanding and the motivation of the earlier choice and to clarify doubts and problems of which they have subsequently become aware. Such an assessment should include the following questions:

1. What were the motives of my earlier decision? Have they been deepened and confirmed in the subsequent years? (The understanding of priesthood, for instance, may undergo great changes from the year of joining the seminary to the time of ordination).

2. What are the concrete experiences concerning my vocation e.g. the feedback I get from the exercise of pastoral duties, teaching, preaching, etc; meeting priests who were happy, or unhappy in their priestly life and ministry; the attitude of people towards priests; appreciation, criticism, rejection; the personal experiences of pastoral contacts with people?

3. How do I look forward to priesthood? Is there a fear in me, articulate or hidden, of personal frustration, of tensions, of pastoral failure, of aloneness in a celibate life? What are the hopes and aspirations to which I am looking forward?

Such an assessment is important: it clarifies the outlook on the future life; it also gives some assurance. When one day actual problems do come up, they are not simply unexpected if the life-situation has been, as far as possible, realistically foreseen and accepted earlier. Analogous assessments should be made by religious, by lay persons in their professional careers, etc.

In a second step the retreatant is asked to identify and, as far as possible, to spell out clearly his 'vocation within the vocation', i.e. the concrete way in which his life ought to be lived. The answer to this question obviously includes the acceptance of the general norms and demands of each one's state of life. It must, however, be lived according to individual qualities, related to the needs and the situation of the surrounding world and guided by the inner inspiration.

The Biblical Pattern

The meditations of this day may follow again a biblical pattern as it actually is suggested by St. Ignatius himself (n 138): he sees Jesus' hidden life as a life of "observing the commandments", i.e. as conformity to existing structures. But there is also Jesus who, at the age of twelve, unexpectedly remains in the temple—his personal response to God's call.

1. *Jesus' Life in Nazareth* (Lk 2,39,51f).

The texts of Luke contain nothing of a personal biography of Jesus. In their stereotype paleness they express best what these years really meant for Jesus: his insertion into our human conditions and limitations as a simple village boy. We call

these years Jesus' hidden life in contrast to the public ministry. But this very word "hidden" could be misleading as if Jesus had something to hide and lived this life as a kind of role play—'as if' he were an ordinary boy. He *was* an ordinary boy, growing up within his small world in rural surroundings, in the religious traditions of his people.

In this world "he grew up and became strong, filled with wisdom." He awakens to the social and religious situation which forms the background of his later teaching. He felt the lot of the poor people who were marginalized, the contempt in which they were held by the religious elite. He becomes aware of the divisions among the people, their judgmental attitudes, the lack of forgiveness and brotherhood, the emptiness of much of their religious ritual. He also witnesses the political unrest and the resistance against the Roman rule which occasionally flared up in armed revolt.

In this world of striking contrasts—rural beauty and peace, human poverty, oppression, helplessness and messianic hope—Jesus' vision of God's reign develops. He becomes himself. We have no records of this time of his growth, his prayer, his waiting and patience. The only thing we know is his anonymous identity with the world into which he is born and his obedient acceptance of it.

2. *Jesus' Personal vocation* (Lk 2, 41-50).

There is, however, one gospel account in which the personal and unique vocation of Jesus breaks through. This is an anticipation of what he is to be, of what grows in him during the silent years of anonymity. It is the account of Jesus at twelve years of age in the temple.

The age of twelve is significant for the Jews. It marks the beginning of personal responsibility in the observance of the law. It is also the beginning of the teens, the age of the awakening personality and self-assertion. How will Jesus assert his personal life?

Jesus is the Son of God, sent by the Father on his unique mission to reveal God's love and proclaim his reign. This call awakens in Jesus during the silent years of Nazareth. Luke's description of this awakening is full of deep insights into an

adolescent mind. It is a teenage story with all the beauty and pain of this age.

"They went up (to Jerusalem) according to the custom": It all takes place in the setting of a customary pilgrimage, which, however, expresses something of the unique vocation of Israel. The centre of Jewish life is not the village but the temple, which is the visible symbol of God's presence among his people. Jesus sings the same hymns of pilgrimage as the other boys (PPss 120-134), but in his voice they have a new ring. He takes part in the same ritual of the paschal meal as all the people, but his heart is full of God's mystery. What does all this mean, these ancient rituals and traditions?

"He stayed behind": he must remain in this city. It is his home, the house of his Father. Here he must realize more and more the mystery of God and of his people. This is the world to which he really belongs.

"The parents looked for him among their kinsfolk and acquaintances": Mary and Joseph remain in the world of traditions, and expect their boy also to be there. They must realize that Jesus no longer belongs to them.

"They found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.": these are the keywords of adolescence: he listened to the traditions which struck him with such power on this great feast of the passover. He listened to their explanations and comments. But these comments do not fathom the depth of the mystery. What does God really want of his people? This boy has so many searching questions. What is going on in him? "And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers".

The parents find their son. Two worlds are meeting: Mary and Joseph who knew Jesus only as the boy of the small world of Nazareth. "They were astonished": they feel the pain which the child has inflicted on them. They still address him as *their* son: "Son, why have you done this?"

Jesus' answer seems to come from an infinite distance, from another world which had been growing in him: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" This

is his real life, it is his future. His loyalty belongs not to his earthly family, it belongs only to his Father.

"They did not understand the saying": how could they? It is the pain of parents who see their child growing towards his own future. Jesus awakens to his mission. It sets him apart from all people, even his own family. They returned to Nazareth and "Jesus was obedient to them." He remains in the traditional setting of his life till his hour comes. But his life is sealed with his own destiny.

In Jesus the adolescent I may recognise the awakening of my own personal vocation, the name by which God called me, my true self. It is the aim of today's prayer that I may find it. No one can give it to me; it is hidden in the depth of my heart. Many may not understand it. But only if I respond to God's personal call shall I be able to fulfil my mission also for the people.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. "*Behold, I come*" (Hebr 10,5-7).

The letter to the Hebrews shows Jesus as the fulfilment of the religious traditions of the Jews. In the old covenant Yahweh had called Israel into a personal communion with himself: "I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is 43,1) and "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Deut 6,5). The covenant had been institutionalized, embodied in laws and rituals. At Jesus' time the code of rules had for many become more important than the love of God; it had become a substitute for the personal surrender to God in a new life of righteousness and justice.

In Jesus, in the New Covenant, the original meaning of Israel's election is renewed and fulfilled. It is not based on rituals but on the personal self-gift to God realized in his life and death. So Jesus becomes the pattern of our life. The text from the letter to the Hebrews is a paraphrase of Ps 40. The Psalm becomes Jesus' morning prayer in which the entire meaning of his life and mission is summed up.

— "When Christ came into the world, he said: Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired": rituals are

symbols, which have meaning only as long as they represent and express the personal self-gift to God, otherwise they are empty. They can become a mockery if they are turned into a substitute for the personal surrender.

- “A body you have prepared for me”; The biblical meaning of ‘body’ is the entire person, his life, his relation to the world, his contacts with the people, his task and mission, his struggles, conflicts, rejections. God has given Jesus his body, his concrete human life. In this body, in his human existence he belongs to God, comes to God.
- “I have come to do your will, O God”: this is Jesus’ life, all that he is from birth to his end on the cross, his deeds, his speaking, his invitations, rejections, failures, all this is his body, his coming to God: “I have come”. Jesus is the model of the Christian vocation.
- “I appeal to you . . . to present your bodies as a living sacrifice holy and acceptable to God, which is spiritual worship” (Rom 12,1). This is the Christian vocation in Jesus Christ. It is never to be diverted into exterior actions or observances. The one life, the body, which God has given to me, is the only gift that God wants of me. It is the searching question of the Spiritual Exercises to find and to accept my life and to offer it to God.

2. *How to find my personal vocation*

This is a process of growing inner awareness. It may be helped

- by retracing the divine guidance in my life, the growing understanding of the lights and experiences of past retreats;
- by inspirations coming from the world in which I live and move: the encounter with people, inspiring books, challenging happenings in my surroundings and in the wider world, the actual situations and responsibilities I have to face;

- by the inner inspirations during these Spiritual Exercises; compare them with past experiences and share them with the director of your retreat. It is in sharing that vague perceptions become more articulate;
- by prayer: only in God's presence, in the silent attentiveness to his inner guidance can I find my true self, the vocation within my vocation.

OTHER READINGS

- Col 3, 12-25: God's will in ordinary life.
- Jer 1, 1-10; 1 Sam 3: (or other vocation accounts) The personal call.

QUESTIONS

1. As Jesus was obedient and lived under the law, do I recognize God's will in my ordinary life: surroundings, companions, occupations, responsibilities, etc.?
2. Have I become aware of my own unique, personal call, the vocation within my vocation?

FOR REFLECTION:

A Prayer of Abandonment:

"Father, I abandon myself into your hands, do with me what you will. Whatever you may do, I thank you, I am ready for all, I accept all.

Let only your will be done in me and in all creatures. I wish no more than this, O Lord.

Into your hand, O Lord, I commend my soul. I offer it to you with all the love of my heart, for I love you, Lord, and so must give myself, surrender myself into your hands without reserve and with boundless confidence, for you are my Father."

CHARLES DE FOUCAULD

THE CONFLICT

*"Do you think that I have come to give peace on earth?
No, I tell you, but rather division" (Lk 12,51).*

Such words sound hard and seem to belie the Christmas message of peace. What is peace, what is conflict in the bible? The peace of Christmas, and once more the peace of Easter, is not capitulation before the powers of darkness. Christian peace does not avoid conflict. It is not pacifism at any price. It is the divine assurance of final victory over all evil, not a victory by power but a victory by love.

Jesus' entire life is a conflict, a relentless struggle against the powers of darkness, of evils which are entrenched in human society and have their ally in every human heart. It is a conflict in which Jesus seems to go down and to suffer defeat, and still it ends in the glory of Easter. All authentic disciples of Jesus have to share in this conflict and will be with him in his final victory: "He who conquers, I will grant him to sit with me on my throne, as I myself conquered and sat down with my Father on his throne" (Rev 3,21).

John's gospel sees the entire mission of Jesus as a struggle against the powers of evil. The world has lost its original beauty in which it was created; John sees it closed against the light. Jesus is God's light entering into the darkness of the world, but the world resists: "The light came into the world and men loved darkness rather than light because their deeds

were evil" (Jn 31,9). Still, light remains victorious: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it" (Jn 1,5).

The synoptic gospels describe this struggle between light and darkness as it took place in Jesus' own life and unfolded in his mission. This conflict of Jesus is the pattern of every Christian life and must be faced by all disciples of Jesus.

This then is the theme of the meditations of this day: the conflict in Jesus' life, the temptation at the outset of his mission, which continues in his own life and in the life of the Church, in every human life. His conflict with the powers of darkness must be faced by all who wish to be his disciples.

Jesus' Temptation (Mt 4,1-11; Lk 4,1-13).

"Jesus was led by the spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"

The account of Jesus temptation, which in the synoptic gospels is put at the beginning of his public ministry, is not the report of a chronicle but the thematic anticipation of the conflict that pervades his entire life. The people expect a victorious Messiah who will restore Israel's glory. Will he fall in line with their dreams? This is his temptation that their hopes become his own dreams, alluring him to a life of success, glory, power.

Jesus was truly tempted. What the gospels tell us is not merely a pedagogical demonstration of how to face and resist temptations. Any such demonstration would be useless had not Jesus himself really been tempted. This is what the gospels tell us, and it has been repeated with special emphasis in the letter to the Hebrews: "Because he himself has suffered and been tempted he is able to help those who are tempted" (Hebr 2,18), and "he was tempted as we are yet without sinning" and so He is able "to sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebr 4,15).

What is temptation? Every human heart knows the gravitation towards itself: I tend to make myself the centre of my thoughts and intentions: I seek my comfort, my social status, my influence and power. Each one is engaged in

building his own world and expanding it — it ceases to be God's world and becomes the domain of human domination.

Such was also the ambiguity of the messianic expectation of the Jews: God had chosen them as his own; they expected him to send a leader who would give back to them freedom and sovereignty; he would restore their national pride and inaugurate a new era. Would it be the establishment of God's reign, or their own political emancipation?

This ambiguity became Jesus' temptation: He was sent to proclaim God's reign which had nothing to do with political ambitions. He will tell the people that God alone is Lord, that no one can serve two masters. He will call them to a life of love against selfishness with its thousand forms and masks, of selfgift against possessive power. Will they accept him?

With this message Jesus stands alone. All will love his vision of a new world but they will not be ready to change their hearts. Will Jesus be able to hold out against the common trend, against public opinion, accepted standards and values? It would be so much easier for him to be "realistic", to conform with the thinking of the people and speak their language. They would welcome him and make him their leader. But Jesus is on a mission from his Father, he must be different and offer a real alternative, an altogether new outlook on world and life. Will he be able to do this, all his life, even when they reject him and put him to death?

Thus Jesus' entire life is the persistent struggle against the temptation to conform to his surroundings and to make a compromise with the expectations of the people, to surrender to the attractions and powers of selfishness which have a hold on every heart and so to give recognition to Satan's reign.

"If you are the Son of God"

This is tempting language: can there be anything greater, more assuring than to be Son of God? The Father's voice from heaven had recognized Jesus as "my beloved Son". The world seems to lie open before him: God will make him great. "If you are God's Son..." It is a word that arouses dreams of a future of glory and power; Jesus will be the messianic king as so many Jews expected him.

For Jesus "Son of God" has an entirely different meaning. For him God the Father is love, intimate communion, but also total authority to whom all life belongs: "I am the Lord, your God...you shall have no other gods before me" (Ex 20,2f) and "the Lord our God is one Lord and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart" (Deut 6,4). At last the people have to understand the total, all embracing reign of God. Jesus will not speak of a God in the high heavens but of his love which pervades and transforms our world. All other powers—possessive, oppressive, divisive, destructive—will be overcome. There will be a new community of brotherhood, of love and sharing; this is God's reign. It will be Jesus' mission to proclaim and live this new life and to bear the conflict and the rejection on the part of the people, because they will feel threatened. Many speak about God and dream of being God's children, but what they expect from God is an increase of their own comfort, glory and power. Will they ever understand what God's reign really means?

"Command these stones to become loaves of bread"

Bread is our basic need. Jesus knows it after the forty days of prayer and fasting. If God is Father, he must give us bread as he did to the fathers in the desert.

Now the dream begins, the temptation: Jesus is Son of God—does this not mean unlimited power? Cannot he do what God himself had done in the past for the people who were in distress, tortured by hunger? Jesus sees himself among the people who are hungry, far away from their villages. They trusted him, followed him into deserted places, and now they are tired and need food. He sees himself in their midst, he will make them sit down in groups and then take the few loaves which are there and have them distributed by the disciples. They will all eat and be satisfied; and they will wonder, their enthusiasm will rise. They will acclaim him king, thousands are there, and many more will follow and swell their ranks, and he will be the Messiah King, in power!

The dream goes on: they will believe in him, they will accept him as sent by God. The Messiah must come in *glory*. They actually expect him to come from heaven. He sees himself on the pinnacle of the temple; below him are the

masses of the people coming from villages, coming from distant countries, from all nations. Again the voice speaks: "Throw yourself down! Are you not God's Son? Angels will come and catch you, and the people will acclaim you." This is what they need — the Roman Emperors, all great kings knew it—bread to eat and spectacles, something for the eye to see, and for the imagination to feed upon. He will be carried by the enthusiasm of the masses, and then his reign will begin. This is the ancient promise that David's kingdom will be restored, *he will rule*. Not only this small country will bow before him, but all the nations, the kingdoms on the earth!

There is once more the tempting voice: "All this I will give you". From powerful countries and distant islands they will come and bring their gifts to the Holy City; Jerusalem will be the centre of the world—is it not all written in the sacred books of the prophets? Dreams are fascinating, you cannot get rid of them and you do not want them to disappear; king over the nations! There is only one condition. . . .

"If you fall down and worship me"

This is the real issue: *Who will rule?* Will Jesus proclaim and establish his own kingdom, a human kingdom, on the same basic pattern as the great empires which come and go? All of them are built on the same foundation: bread, glory and power. Or, will he inaugurate God's reign, the everlasting kingdom, the beginning of a new creation? Once more the same issue is at stake as in the beginning of our race: is God the centre and goal of all things, or will men usurp his place? "You will be like God". This is what all people through the ages try to become by building their own kingdom in their own way. Most of them have to do it on a small scale within their little world, others succeed in extending it to ever wider dimensions. But the driving force and the root is the same: the human need for bread, the longing for glory and social status, the urge to dominate, the desire for power. Is this merely human? Or is it once again the serpent of the paradise, evoking the temptation of human autonomy, the revolt against God?

"You shall worship the Lord your God, and him alone shall you serve"

This is Jesus' answer. He is sent to proclaim, and bring

into the world, the reign of God; he remains faithful to this mission to the end of his life. It will happen, as in the vision of his temptation, that he will indeed give bread to the hungry. And they will inevitably be aroused by his love and power and will want to make him king by force. The disciples will be thrilled by this movement. What will then happen? Jesus will send the masses away, order his disciples into a boat, and he himself will withdraw to a lonely place to pray (Jn 6,14f; Mk 6,45f). On the following day, when he meets the people once more in the synagogue of Capernaum, he will speak to them not of bread that fills the stomach but of the bread of life, and they will be disappointed and drift away. What finally can Jesus bring them?

His message is of God's reign. Not like human empires will it be based on bread, on economic, social and political foundations, but on God's word, on his love and power: "Man shall not live on bread alone but on every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." God's word can change our hearts, renew our society, make us brothers and sisters. This will be possible if we renounce our selfish sovereignty by which we try to influence and manipulate our neighbour and even our God. This is what we do when we tempt the Lord and try to make him subservient to our selfish schemes: "You shall not tempt the Lord your God." We must understand the meaning of God's reign, its contrast to our thinking and planning. Jesus will be the "Son of God", not as people expect and Satan suggests as though "Son of God" were a title of glory and power for himself. Jesus will be the Son of his Father who proclaims God's reign and reveals his love to save and renew the world: "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him alone shall you serve."

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus' conflict with the disciples* (Mk 8,27-38).

The scene is the Galilean crisis, the period in Jesus' life when it becomes clear that Israel's leaders refused to accept him and his message. He withdraws outside the country near Caesarea Philippi. It is a decisive hour for the disciples. In your meditation live this hour, which is decisive also for you, as a personal encounter with Jesus.

- “Who do men say that I am?”: the disciples are invited to assess the reaction of the people to Jesus. What do people say today about him?
- “Who do *you* say I am?”: this is the personal question addressed to every disciple—addressed to me.
- “You are the Christ!”: Peter recognizes Jesus as Messiah through whom God’s reign is revealed and inaugurated. Speaking in the name of the other disciples, Peter stands for Jesus in this hour of crisis. But for Peter “Messiah” still means earthly king. Thus Jesus has to make it clear what his mission implies:
- “The Son of Man must suffer”: Faith in Jesus implies acceptance of the conflict and rejection which are part of his mission. His final victory will not be won by power but through his death and resurrection.
- “Peter began to rebuke him”: the idea of a suffering Messiah is totally inconceivable for Jewish thinking; it contradicts all their expectations and hopes.
- “Get behind me, Satan. You are thinking not God’s thoughts but human thoughts”. For Jesus Peter’s words ring once more with the voice of the tempter in the desert.
- “He called the multitude”: Jesus wants no ambiguity: the disciples must know that his own way of the cross will be the pattern of all Christian life.
- “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me”: Jesus’ disciples will share in his conflict, rejection and cross, to have part in his saving mission.
- “Whoever would save his life will lose it; whoever will lose his life for my sake will save it”: all must find life. Jesus came to bring it in its fulness. But those who try to find it in the narrowness of their own world and interests will lose it; those who learn to surrender it in love to God, and to spend it in service to their neighbour, will find it. This is the paradox which faces all followers of Jesus.

2. **Two Banners** (Spiritual Exercises nn. 136-148)

Ignatius presents the conflict between God's reign and the powers of darkness in the meditation on the two banners. As other texts in the Spiritual Exercises, so also this meditation is framed in the feudal setting of his time. However, the conflict described in it concerns every person. Read it in the original text.

The entire world is divided into two camps: Jesus in Jerusalem, the city-symbol of God's reign, and Lucifer in Babylon, the city-symbol of the power of darkness. These are the two cities which Augustine described as the rallying centres of good and evil, "the city of God built on God's love, the city of Satan built on self-love". The dividing line between the two cities runs not through the visible world — there is no black and white demarcation running through our history of society—it runs invisibly through the whole world, also through the Church, through every human heart, wherever God's invitation and the allurements of Satan conflict with one another.

Satan sends his messengers into every corner of the world. His threefold program is to lead people "to covet riches...to attainment of honours...to come to pride: his allurements consists of wealth, glory, power and pride.

Jesus too sends his messengers into the entire world to invite all people to spiritual and actual poverty, to readiness to suffer insults and humiliation, and thus to come to humility, which "leads to all other virtues". These are the three steps in contrast to Satan's triple allurements: poverty, insults and humility as against riches, honours and pride.

It is the special prayer of this meditation to obtain "knowledge of the deceits of the rebel chief and help to guard myself against them", and a "knowledge of the true life" exemplified in Jesus.

The fruit of these meditations should be a deeper and clearer insight into the movements of my own heart, the orientations and values which influence my life, my relations to others and my work. All spheres of my

life are scenes of the conflict between love and selfishness, ultimately between God and Satan; they ought to be transformed by the Spirit of Jesus.

OTHER READINGS:

- Mt 7, 15-20: False prophets.
- Mt 13, 24-30: Tares and wheat.
- Eph 6, 10-18: The spiritual armour.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are the areas of conflict, open or hidden, between the spirit of Jesus and the allurements of evil in your surroundings? Do you find this conflict in your own heart?
2. Have you experienced the isolation that results from your determined stand in conflict situations?
3. Reflect on your understanding of peace and conflict: there is *false* peace based on ignorance and blindness in face of evil; of laziness which does not want to be disturbed; of cowardice which is afraid of conflict and commitment. *True* peace is the assurance of God's guidance and power in the struggle against evil.

There is a *false* conflict—the world is full of it. It is based on selfishness, oppression in its many forms. There is the *true* conflict between light and darkness, true love and selfishness.

FOR REFLECTION:

“Man, therefore, is divided in himself. As a result the whole life of men, both individual and social, shows itself to be a struggle, and a dramatic one, between good and evil, between light and darkness. Man finds that he is unable of himself to overcome the assaults of evil successfully so that everyone feels as though bound by chains. But the Lord himself came to free and strengthen man, renewing him inwardly and casting out “the prince of the world” (Jn 12,31).

Vatican II, G.S. N. 13

JESUS ALONE

Three Degrees of Humility Sp. Ex. No. 165-168.

"For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him... that I may know him and the power of his resurrection and may share in his sufferings becoming like him in his death that, if possible, I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3, 8-11).

The second week of the Spiritual Exercises is meant to lead the retreatant to the threshold of an option for his life. Where is the norm for this option? Is there an ultimate criterion by which human decisions can be guided, which help us to assess the happenings around us and to discern also the movements and trends in the life of the Church? We have the divine commandments; we find norms and guidelines in the gospels and in Jesus' own words; for more immediate guidance the Church has formulated her laws and religious communities have worked out their Constitutions. But laws and norms are general, are for everyone, and still leave the most personal decisions to each one's free option, e.g. to get married or to remain single, to become a priest, to join a religious community, etc. Besides, laws are elusive and can easily be manipulated according to each one's likings. Is there a workable norm?

God's ultimate word to us does not consist in laws; it is not even fully contained in Jesus' message and teaching. God has spoken in his Son: Jesus himself, his person, his life, his

proclamation and struggle, his rejection and death and finally his resurrection are God's final word to us. In Jesus, his Son, God shows us the meaning of our human existence, the destiny of man and the world. It is for each generation, for every culture, in ever changing situations that we have to grasp the meaning of this revelation and to translate it into the language of our time. Each person has to find for himself/herself what Jesus invites him/her to be, to become. The Spiritual Exercises are a guide in this search. The meditations of this day lead us to the ultimate norm in our options, to the person of Jesus.

Ignatius puts this theme into a wider context: he presents the norms for our options in three stages, which he calls three degrees of humility. Humility for Ignatius has nothing to do with self-abasement, with feelings of inferiority or self-destructive submissiveness. Humility here means the ready and joyful acceptance of my unique place in the world and in God's designs. The whole of the Spiritual Exercises is ordained to this goal, to find and accept this God-ordained place.

The first stage of humility consists in the radical acceptance of God's design as expressed in creation and its order, and as contained in his commandments. In the traditional language used by Ignatius this implies the firm commitment under no circumstances to commit mortal sin, i.e. never to break away from God and the divinely established order, even when this commitment would mean the risk of one's physical life. God is recognised as centre and goal of creation.

The integration into God's designs is deepened in the **second stage of humility**. Our life is woven into the context of world and history. We cannot choose place and circumstances of our life, the family, the nation into which we are born; the gifts and supports, or the blocks and burdens that affect our life and work. It is for us obediently and joyfully, with inner freedom, to accept situations and influences which are beyond our control, whether they favour our growth or seem to hinder it. We must keep this inner freedom also in planning our future: the options which lie before us should not be decided on the basis of merely personal

enrichment, e.g. by the desire for wealth and comfort, for social prestige or any other consideration which would reduce them to a level of pure pragmatism and self-interest. Our only desire should be to serve God, trusting in his wisdom, power and love to give us what is best for us.

This second degree of humility is described by Ignatius also as a firm determination under no condition "to consent to commit venial sin". Venial sin implies an ambiguity, a compromise, as we experience it day by day. On the one hand we wish to remain within the frame of God's will and plan; God is not rejected. On the other hand there is the human weakness to follow our natural attractions and impulses. Thus the second degree of humility means the readiness and determination for the total integration of our life and work into God's designs. Could there still be a higher degree of humility, a still more radical commitment to God's will and love?

The third degree of humility. In fact, this second level with its total surrender to God in detachment of all personal desires would be the perfect response to God's will had God not already spoken to us in Jesus Christ. But in his Son, God has given us the concrete form in which his reign on earth is to be established. Jesus comes as Saviour into a world which is broken and God's reign must be realized in the midst of human autonomy, which includes self-assertion, competitiveness, exploitation, and self-righteousness. Jesus' message was rejected in his time and so it will be rejected also today. He had no weapons to assert or defend himself; neither had he material resources nor social or political power. He had only the good news of God's reign. We too have to learn not to rely on institutional power in the proclamation of Jesus' message. Jesus was, outwardly at least, defeated and ridiculed. Under the cross everyone laughed about this king who has no power; everybody could see that his message did not work in actual life. In the same way his disciples are also ridiculed: "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you" (Jn 15, 18).

A glance at history tells us that the Church did not always follow the path of Jesus. Often in her work and mission she

has relied on social, political, economic power. Today, however, she has recognized that in proclaiming the Good News we have to follow the path which has been shown to us by Jesus who "carried out the work of redemption in poverty and oppression. The Church is called to follow the same path... Although the Church needs human resources to carry out her mission, she is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim, and this by her own example, humility and self-denial" (Lumen Gentium n. 8). "Urged by the Spirit of Christ, the Church must walk the road Christ himself walked, a way of poverty and obedience, of service and self-sacrifice even to death, a death from which he emerged victorious by his resurrection" (Mission Decree n. 5).

It will be hard to follow this path. Jesus, too, was afraid of suffering and death and "offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death" (Hebr 5, 7). As to ourselves, no one expects us to love pain and death. Still, we know that in suffering we are close to Jesus, similar to him, united in his saving passion as his true disciples. So it may be possible, as Ignatius suggests to "desire and choose poverty with Christ poor rather than riches; insults with Christ loaded with them rather than honours; to be accounted worthless and a fool for Christ rather than to be esteemed as wise and prudent in this world, in order to imitate and be in reality more like Christ our Lord" (n. 167).

Thus there is an ultimate norm for our decisions: God has spoken in Jesus, his Son. His life of love, his struggle against injustice and sin, his rejection and his passion are the model in which his disciples see their own life and mission.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The Transfiguration* (Mk 9, 2-8; Mt 17, 1-8; Lk 9, 28-36).

All Synoptics link the Transfiguration with the preceding scene in which Jesus speaks about the passion and Peter rebukes him. Once more Jesus is tempted and rejects Peter: "Get behind me, Satan." Jesus cannot withdraw

his words about the passion and the need for all his disciples to follow him in carrying the cross; but Peter does not come any closer to an understanding of the mystery of suffering. There are things which cannot be explained in words. How will Jesus resolve the impasse?

This is the context of the scene in the gospels. The account itself breaks through the frame of Jesus' earthly life and reflects the post-Easter experience of the disciples. It is placed into this context because the readers of the gospels, the Christian community, must see Jesus' passion in the light of Easter, of fulfilment. They must listen to the whole Christ, who suffered, who is risen.

- "After six days" . . . Jesus' passion and glory are inseparably connected, yet distinct like question and answer. Often we seem to be left alone with our questions; Peter had to wait six days.
- "Jesus took Peter and James and John with him and led them up a high mountain apart by themselves": the answer to this problem must be very personal. Each one is called by name to come apart from the crowd, from the pressure of daily surroundings. In aloneness, in God's presence, on a high mountain, God's Spirit teaches and transforms human hearts.
- "He was transfigured before them": God speaks in Jesus. In their daily experience the disciples—and all of us—encounter only the earthly reality, the inscrutable world, the powers of darkness and death. Faith sees more: Jesus is transfigured before their eyes. The light of eternity breaks into our night.
- "Elijah and Moses appeared to them": they are the representatives of the old covenant, the law and the prophets. Jesus' coming and message are not an isolated event but the climax of God's revelation in the past; he is the new and final covenant. He sums up the voice of the prophets and brings the law to fulfilment in his death and resurrection.
- "Master, it is well that we are here": This is once more Peter, who had not understood Jesus' words

of the passion. He sees the glorious Lord who comes to life through death, who is the promise of our glory. God can give us hours when the dimness of our faith is filled with the light of God.

- “And a cloud overshadowed them”: The cloud is the sign of God’s presence, before him we become silent.
- “This is my beloved Son, listen to him”: God speaks, as at the baptism in the Jordan, in words of the prophet (Is 42,1). In Jesus, his Son, God speaks to us. It is for us to listen.
- “They saw no longer anyone but Jesus alone”: they return to their normal surroundings. There is Jesus again in his everyday appearance. Life with him goes on along the same path leading towards Calvary. Nothing has really changed, not even their minds have been enlightened. Still, the paralysing spell is broken. They know that Jesus is more than what the eye can see. They continue to follow him.

The fruit of this meditation shall be the longing for a deeper union with Jesus. Growth in the spirit does not consist in intellectual insights but in the growing closeness to Jesus’ person; in him I shall find the mystery of his life and of my own life.

2. *The Experience of an Apostle* (Phil 1, 12-2, 5).

St. Paul writes to the Philippians in a situation of utter insecurity. He is in prison, under trial. Will he be condemned to death? Will he be freed? What will happen to the young communities in Corinth, in Philippi? In reading these texts in a meditative manner, try to enter into the mind and heart of a man who knows human experiences of joy, of disappointment, of anxiety but is deeply anchored in the peace and assurance of his faith in Jesus Christ.

- “What has happened to me has served to advance the gospel” (1, 12-14): his personal condition as a prisoner, the limitation of his freedom and the embarrassment from his situation do not matter to him, if only Jesus Christ is preached.

- “Only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; in this I rejoice” (1, 15-18): he is faced with the jealousy of other “apostles” who take advantage of his predicament to advance their own status and influence. Paul is beyond such rivalries; his only concern is the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- “Always Christ will be honoured in my body, whether by life or by death” (1, 19-26): he cannot foresee the outcome of his trial. On the one hand he desires “to depart and be with Christ, this is far better”. At the same time he knows that “to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account”. He feels that he will remain, and his return to the community will give “ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus”.
- “Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1, 27-30): the unity, firmness, confidence, readiness to suffer will be a witness to Christ.
- “Have this mind among yourselves which was in Christ Jesus” (2, 1-11): The community problems of Philippi, discord, ambition, rivalry are solved in the Spirit of Jesus, for which he quotes an ancient Christological hymn.

In reading such texts we may learn to see the concrete problems and challenges of our own life, big and small, in the new light of Jesus. We will find in him, in his person, the norm for our attitudes and decisions. The Christian life is based not on a code of rules or a set of principles but on the person of Jesus Christ. Paul sums up this supreme norm of Christian living: “Be imitators of me as I am of Christ” (1 Cor 11, 1).

Similarly, Peter teaches the faithful to look at Jesus, particularly in times of trial because “Christ also suffered for you giving you an example that you should follow in his steps” (1 Pet 2, 21). Jesus himself points to his example when he finds his disciples divided by jealousy and ambition: “The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10, 45).

OTHER READINGS:

- Eph 3, 14-21: That Christ may live through faith in your hearts.
- Phil 3, 1-14: Jesus Christ is the only support of the Apostle's life.
- Hebr 12, 1-11: Look at Jesus as the model of faith.

QUESTIONS:

1. What are the criteria by which we judge the importance of events and enterprises in our surroundings, civic and religious? What are the criteria for making our own decisions?
2. Reflect on ways by which you learn to make Jesus the norm of your life and work. Exterior imitation is meaningless, because he lived in altogether different conditions; how can your life be guided and formed by his Spirit?

FOR REFLECTION:

When Paul VI addressed the Vatican Council for the first time, after having been elected Pope, he gave this basic orientation: "Christ is our beginning, Christ our leader and our life, Christ our end... The living and holy Church, i.e. we ourselves, are linked to Christ from whom we begin, through whom we live, towards whom we move... Our minds should not look for any other truth but the words of the Lord who is our daily teacher. At nothing else should we aim but in faithful obedience to follow his commands. No other confidence should support us but the one that strengthens our weakness when we trust his words: I shall be with you to the end of time."

CONTEMPLATIVE PRAYER

"Be persistent in prayer, and be alert as you pray, thanking God"
(Col 4,2).

The second week of the Spiritual Exercises leads the retreatant through the meditation on Jesus' life and mission to a deeper knowledge of Jesus and to the application of the Christic pattern to his own life and work. Some of the mysteries of Jesus' life are given special emphasis, e.g. the Incarnation and the Nativity. For the remaining meditations of this week various topics are proposed (n. 161); they are spelled out briefly at the end of the book (nn. 211-288). Much freedom is left in their use (n. 262). The purpose of such meditations is not to cover the entire life of Jesus but to deepen the personal contact of the retreatant with Jesus the Lord.

It is for this reason that we devote a special day to prayer, and more concretely to contemplative prayer. Prayer cannot be simply an exercise, whether mental or oral; it must grow into a quiet and constant awareness of God's loving presence in our life and world. It must be contemplative.

Have we still time for contemplation?

Even people who are faithful to their daily prayers may consider contemplation out of reach: Where could we find the atmosphere of peace and stillness which seems essential for contemplation? Some may even resent the suggestion

of contemplative prayer: is it not an escape from the harsh reality of life in which we, all of us, are entangled. We are not allowed to withdraw into a realm of peace when God has placed us into a world of conflict, not only for our own survival but for the needs of many people around us. God's kingdom is surrounded by powers of darkness: "Our adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion seeking some-one to devour" (1 Pet 5,8). We must be watchful. A battlefield seems no place for contemplation.

This categorical conclusion, however, spontaneously evokes the memory of perhaps the most contemplative book of Indian spirituality, the Bhagvadgita, which brings to a synthesis the main currents of India's ancient traditions. It is the dialogue of Arjuna, the warrior, with Krishna Bhagavan himself, the infinite God in the disguise of his charioteer. The dialogue takes place in the open field between the two armies which are lined up for the decisive battle. Arjuna is bewildered by the absurdity of the conflict and asks the ultimate questions: Is there any sense in this battle — any sense in human existence at all? The clichés of traditional reasoning lose their meaning in the acute situation of conflict and doubt. The ensuing dialogue unfolds the ultimate problems of human life, of all creation — they are resolved in the inscrutable mystery of God.

So I may feel inclined to reverse the above categorical statement into its very contrary: conflict situations, the awareness of the problems of life and world, the inscrutable ambiguity and elusiveness of human existence are the only legitimate place of contemplation. If contemplation were to lead us away from real life and responsible involvement it would turn out to be an escape and could claim no place in a serious and committed life.

What is Christian contemplation?

So we have to clarify what we mean by contemplation, and more specifically by Christian contemplation. Because contemplation is by no means a monopoly of Christianity. In fact it is found more frequently outside the Church in other spiritual traditions, in ancient times as well as today.

Such traditions deeply influenced the contemplative life in the Church. Therefore we must search for the genuine biblical element of contemplation.

In the early Christian centuries contemplation developed in close contact with Neo-Platonic spirituality which sprang from an overwhelming realization of the divine mystery, of God the all surpassing and all-pervading wellspring of all being. God is exalted above our bewildering world of strife and struggle. The spark of this divine life, however, is hidden in every heart, though covered and obscured by our passions, fears and desires. It can never be extinguished, but it must be liberated. It is the endeavour of the spiritual man to break out of the prison of the senses, of our world of change and desire, to share in the divine peace. This endeavour has been compared with Moses' ascent to the mountain of God, the solitary peak of Sinai, remote from the dark valleys where the people are left behind and indulge in their orgies, dancing round the golden bull. On those solitary heights, away from the follies and sins of the world, Moses receives God's commandments which are meant to guide the people.

The overwhelming awareness of the divine mystery, which inspired these mystics, seems to have vanished from the modern mind. We are engrossed in a technical and pragmatic approach to reality, concerned with our needs, struggling for social and economic security. Our world has become empty; all things, even people, are measured by their usefulness. For our ancestors forests were groves in which you might meet Krishna; for us they have become just firewood. Life is scattered, it is rush and activity. Even the Church is absorbed in functions and organisations. The sense of the divine, the hidden life of the spirit, lies buried below the heavy layers of institutional efficiency. In vain are we waiting for the ascent to the divine mystery.

But there is danger in this form of contemplation borrowed from Neo-Platonism — and similar are the dangers in some meditation forms coming from Eastern religions. Neo-Platonism was based on a dychotomy of the actual world of experience and the realm of the spirit: we must leave the world to find God. Such contemplation could lead us away

from the very meaning of creation; we could lose the richness of human life; we might not find Jesus.

We listen to the Bible: God has created man "to subdue the earth", to humanize his creation. Our life is woven into our world and society. We are truly human only if we find our place in God's creation and fulfill our task in human society. Searching for God cannot be an excuse from fulfilling our destiny on earth.

The Bible tells us how the leaders of God's people found God not by withdrawing into isolation but by giving themselves to the arduous tasks entrusted to them without reserve. Moses encountered God in the burning bush to be sent on a mission which would fill every day of his life. Samuel was called by God to lead Israel into a new era of their history. The prophets receive God's message to communicate it to the people.

The prayer of Jesus

So it was with Jesus. What is the place of prayer in his life? The Gospels contain a number of instructions about prayer related to the religious practices of the people of his time, useful also today: Not to make a show of prayer before others (Mt 6,5f), not to multiply words unnecessarily as if God were in need of information about our problems (Mt 6,7f); in Luke we read the powerful instruction about total confidence in prayer (Lk 11,5-14). We must, however, admit that similar instructions could have been given by other pious rabbis of Jesus' time. As to Jesus' own prayer habits we know little. He surely was familiar with the prayer book of his time, the psalms. As a devout Jew he was fond of the feasts of the nation and took part in the traditional rituals. Some of his own prayers are handed down to us by the evangelists: the praise of the Father on the occasion when the disciples returned from their first mission (Mt 11,25f), the prayer in the garden (Mk 14,36), the priestly prayer in which he sums up his mission at the end of his life (Jn 17); in the 'Our Father' he gives us the model for our prayer (Mt 6,9-13). All these texts, however, have their full resonance only if they are inserted in the wider context of the Gospel accounts. We

must breathe the atmosphere of Jesus' abiding union with his Father in every scene of the gospels, in every situation of his life. This union with Abba, his Father, is not just one element of his inner life but rather the undercurrent of his existence. It is the life-spring of his mission, his peace in every conflict, the support in each crisis. His thoughts and actions receive orientation from this centre, all his experiences are related to it.

Jesus' mission is not a planned programme but unfolds in sharply changing situations. He must accept them, see their significance and respond to their challenge. The scenes where the gospels tell us of his withdrawal to prayer are occasions on which the persistent intimacy with his Father comes to the surface: grave decisions are at stake, the serenity of God's peace is needed to face hostility and darkness. Each time he has to find the wisdom of the "thoughts that come from God" over the reasonings and calculations "that come from man" (cf. Mk 8,33).

Forty days in the desert are needed before he enters into his ministry to be filled with the message of God's kingdom and to face the temptation implied in his mission" (Mt 4,1-11). Before the momentous and most risky decision of his life to choose the Twelve and to entrust them with his mission he spends the night in prayer (Mk 3,13; Lk 6,12). The horizon darkens, the opposition stiffens; once more he is tempted to plunge into political agitation, to allow the people to make him king. He sends the disciples away and withdraws to pray. Next morning he has the strength to see the disenchanted people drifting away and to ask even his own disciples: "would you also go?" (Jn 6,14f. 67). In the garden Jesus is utterly alone. The echo of the phony assurances of loyalty of his disciples is still in his ears; he leaves them behind, they fall asleep, and he prays: "Father, all things are possible to you, remove this cup from me; yet not what I will but what you will" (Mk 14,36).

This is Jesus' contemplative prayer: intimately united with his Father, totally given to his mission. His prayer is not an escape from problems and tensions. God is present in the midst of his world. Jesus encounters him in his work and

struggle, in hopeful beginnings and in bitter failure: "I am not alone, my Father is with me" (Jn 16,32).

The practice of contemplation

Such is the contemplative prayer also in Christian life. No one can find God apart from the world in which he is placed. If prayer is divorced from work it is empty; if work is drained of God's presence it is reduced to an aimless circle of activities and functions.

God's revelation, the coming of his kingdom, goes on to the end of time. It takes place in our history of world and Church. In the tremendous transformation of this world of ours God's designs are being realized. We must be alert, sensitive and responsive. He is present and active also in my own life. Daily he opens new horizons and invites to new commitments. Alertness and awareness is the mark of contemplative prayers. This, then, is the primary practice of contemplative prayer: "To find God in all things" (this is one of the favorite formulas of Ignatian spirituality), not by mystifying world or nature, but by sensing his presence and hidden designs in his creation, in our own life. It implies however, in Ignatius' experience, the need of "getting rid of the attachment to all creatures". As long as we remain on the level of attraction and dislike, we find only ourselves; the mind remains chained to the mechanisms of the empirical world. Contemplative prayer demands the freedom of mind and heart.

Contemplative prayer would penetrate also the realm of our professional life. You are — to take a concrete example — a teacher, responsible for the discipline of your class, occupied with your subjects, thinking of more effective and appealing didactic methods. But your real concern are the children. Each of them is created in God's love with hidden potentialities, blossoming, or already darkened and repressed by early experiences. God has placed you into their life. Have their needs and problems a place in your prayers? And, far beyond your classroom, are you concerned with the immense problems of education on a national level: The status of teachers, educational standards, political manipulations? The future of the nation is at stake. These problems are your

concern as a Christian teacher, they must be seen in God's presence, must become prayer.— So it would be with every profession: prayer would not go side by side with your work but would give it orientation and meaning. You would encounter God in the situations which God has allotted to you. These should be the questions to ask yourself every evening: What has God told me today? What has he asked of me? How have I responded?

How can such contemplative prayer be practiced? It obviously is not a mere matter of methods, it must spring from the depth of our being because the awareness of the divine is enshrined in every human heart. However deep it is buried below heavy layers of preoccupations and fears, it is there. The hidden potentialities must be awakened and fostered till the closeness to God comprises the whole person and flows through our emotions and senses.

To grow in this awareness, to keep it alive and, in times of darkness, to rediscover it a discipline of life is needed. We need time. Everything that belongs to personal life requires time. To keep children happy parents must give them time, not only toys; marriages get estranged once partners are too busy and have no more time for each other. We need time also for our closeness to God, not merely the time allotted to "spiritual duties" but time of silent presence, of listening, of tasting his love and realizing his creative and healing power. The life of the spirit requires discipline, times and seasons to drink from the waters of salvation.

All life needs structures. Formerly many such structures of the spiritual life were institutionally provided for by canon law or by rules of religious communities. At times they were resented as burdens imposed from outside. In fact in the Council and post-conciliar developments stiff rules have been abandoned and exterior discipline has been reduced. But we ought to see the danger: we throw away vessels and miss the living waters. We cannot return to pre-vatican structures, but it is indispensable that exterior control be replaced by personal discipline and order.

The Spiritual Exercises contain precious helps for the life of prayer. Three keywords may guide us:

- We need an earnest commitment: the life of the spirit is not a hobby but the central concern of our life. It must keep priority in a disciplined life.
- It must be pursued with persevering faithfulness: there are stretches of desert in every journey which offer no tangible rewards for our efforts. Ignatius warns equally against exuberant assurance during periods of enthusiasm and discouragement in seasons of apparent failure. This is possible through
- deep trust in the guidance of the spirit: The initiative is on God's side: he created me in love, he gives me Jesus Christ, he sends the Holy Spirit. It is my part to respond in faith, hope and love.

Is contemplative prayer needed?

Life seems to go on without prayer. Even the life of the Church with its ever growing complexity of works and organisations seems to function satisfactorily with the rhythm of the traditional routine of masses, rosaries and novenas. People don't feel the need of contemplation.

Still, we can hardly brush aside the lurking dissatisfaction with a life that exhausts itself in routine duties. Priests feel the emptiness, often frustration in their ministry. Religious question the meaning of a vocation that seems reduced to routine prayers and chained to the exhausting machinery of institutional functions. Where is that inner call that made them step out of the patterns of ordinary life and consecrate themselves to a life of the spirit? The wider pastoral scene too may set us thinking: Christian people still go to Church (though numbers are decreasing and youth often drops out). But if you ask churchgoers about the fruit they gather from sermons and sacraments, answers are often evasive. Christian life keeps going but its inspiration is fading. Thousands turn to Eastern religions for light.

What is missing? The core of Jesus' message is God the Father, his presence in our world, the coming of his reign. It is the call to true conversion in a new life: God's reign must blossom in our hearts and reach out into our world. The words of Jesus' message are still heard in the Church,

with faithful regularity the gospel is read every Sunday, but the resonance is missing. It is doctrine and exhortation, not life. It was different with Jesus. When he spoke "they were astonished". People were stirred because "he spoke with authority" (Mk 1,22), the authentic transparency of truth and love. He taught what he knew, not what he had read or heard. Our world needs people who know God not only from catechisms and textbooks, but in personal awareness, and are able to carry the peace of God through the noisy bazaar of daily life: contemplative women and men.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. The Lord's prayer

It is a precious key to contemplation: Our pressing needs of daily bread are included; it points at the root of all evil from which we must be delivered. But it first addresses itself to God from whom alone all life and liberation must come.

- When you pray, say Our Father: Jesus invites us to share in his closeness to the Father. His trust in Abba, the Father, and his obedience to him are the basis of discipleship.
- Who are in heaven: God is not part of our world. The assurance of our life is based not on material or social resources but on God himself.
- Hallowed be your name: However much I feel the pressure of immediate needs of body, mind and heart; even if I am overwhelmed by the immense problems of our world — first I raise my eyes and heart to God.
- Your kingdom come: God's reign must come to free us from our own kingdoms in which we isolate ourselves from each other, and from God. God must unite us in solidarity and mutual service.
- Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven: This transformation of our world and society does not take place through spectacular interventions of God but through our response to God's word. God's kingdom is entrusted to us.

- Give us today our daily bread: We turn to our problems. God's love is concerned with us, even with our earthly needs. They too become part of my prayer.
- Forgive us our sins: When God's love touches me I feel the need of healing. His life-giving presence opens my heart to him and to my neighbour.
- As we forgive those who have sinned against us: The new community of God's kingdom begins to grow, forgiven and forgiving.
- And lead us not into temptation: I acknowledge my vulnerability, the ambiguity of my intentions, the traps into which I fall.
- But deliver us from evil: Through Jesus Christ I belong to the new creation from which the powers of death and sin are banned.
- For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory: I join in the acclamation of the Church, ringing with the joy of eternity. We are still pilgrims but sure of the final glory with Jesus, the Risen Lord.
- For ever. Amen.

2. *Gloria, the hymn of praise*

The Eucharist begins in our broken world, with the confession of sins and the prayer for God's healing love: Lord have mercy. Then it bursts into a hymn of praise.

- Glory to God in the highest: It is the angels' song at Christmas. The brightness of God's glory breaks into our darkness, overwhelming, frightening. Has the splendour of God's glory a place in the tired darkness of the shepherds in the middle of the night—in my own life?
- And peace to his people on earth: We have to learn to tear our eyes away from the gloom of our small world. God comes, and with him peace for me and for all people. I must allow his light to scatter my darkness.

- We worship you, we give you thanks, we praise you for your glory: This is a prayer on wings. Only God can give wings to take me off the tiring roads of aimless wanderings, wings to raise me above myself.
- Lord Jesus Christ...you take away the sin of the world: You are with us, Jesus, in our world bound by sin, but you are free. In you all can find freedom and break out of the gravitation that makes us forever turn round our small self. In you we become true community, your Church.
- You are seated at the right hand of the Father, receive our prayer: Alone I cannot pray, but you are with your Father. my Father, You send your Spirit who prays in the depth of my heart (Rom 8,26). In him my prayers are received.
- You alone are the Holy one, you alone the Lord, you alone the most High: In my heart I know it that only you are light and life. But the wonders of your life and love are mine through the Holy Spirit. I praise you for your final gift to share in your life and glory.

3. *The Eucharistic doxology*

The Eucharist is truly Christian contemplation: The celebration of God's immense love which breaks into our world through Jesus Christ so that our community of worship can share in it. It is the celebration also of our human life and of the whole creation which is taken up in Jesus Christ into the ineffable mystery of God. It is the meeting of heaven and earth, God and man, not in a passing ecstasy but in the movement which flows from the depth of God who never ceases to draw his creatures till they find their rest in him. This is the core of all contemplation. It is summed up in the concluding doxology of the canon of the mass.

- All glory and honour is yours, Almighty Father: At the beginning of the Eucharist I found it difficult to raise my eyes beyond the pressing needs of our world: my personal darkness and struggle; the pains

and doubts of my friends and neighbours; the brokenness and desolation of our human family. But you did not allow me to remain in the prison of my gloom. You spoke your word of truth and hope to me; you invited me to confess my faith, a faith that can move mountains; you asked me to open myself to you in an abundance of trust, together with Jesus your Son. So I join my voice of praise and thanks with that of angels and saints: all glory and honour is yours.

- In the community of the Holy Spirit: I am not coming alone; my lonely voice would be lost in the abyss of my nothingness. I need the support of the community, brothers and sisters. Your kingdom comprises all nations bound together in love through your Spirit. Our worshipping community is only a faltering beginning, a mustard seed, but it has your promise: your Spirit will be with us for ever. Let us become your kingdom.
- Through him, with him, in him: You gave us Jesus, your Son. In his life and death we have seen your love for us; in his resurrection we see the power of your love: Life cannot be conquered; love will absorb all darkness. We are with him: he called us to be his disciples, he made us his body so that in him we shall be with you, our Father; and through him we shall bear fruit as branches of the vine.

FURTHER READINGS:

- 1 Kings 8,22-61: Solomon's prayer at the consecration of the temple.
- Wis 9,1-14 : Solomon's prayer for wisdom.
- Lk 11,1-13 : Jesus teaches to pray; the prayer of confidence.
- Mt 6,5-15 : Jesus' instruction on prayer.
- Jn 17 : Jesus' prayer for his own.
- Phil 1,3-11 : Paul's prayer for his beloved community.
- Col 4,2-4 : Persistent prayer.

QUESTIONS

1. I reflect on my prayer: daily prayers, participation in the Eucharist, personal prayer: How are they related to my life and work? How are my life and work inspired by my prayer?
2. What is my favorite prayer: Praise, offering, petition, intercession?
3. Have I searched for the contemplative treasures hidden in the formulae of prayer, mostly in liturgical prayers?

FOR REFLECTION:

"My food is to do the will of him who sent me. So cling closely to the will of this adorable master. Look upon everything, every suffering and every joy as coming straight from him, and your life will be a continual communion since everything will be, as it were, a sacrament which gives you God and this is really true, for God is not divided.

ELISABETH *of the Trinity.*

DISCIPLES OF JESUS

"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should abide" (Jn 15,16).

This last day of the second week of the Spiritual Exercises is meant to sum up the reflections, prayers and decisions of the whole week in a personal offering to Jesus the Lord. This takes the form of commitment to full Christian discipleship.

In India the relationship *Guru-chela* is part and parcel of a spiritual tradition going back to Upanishadic times. It comprises more than teaching and learning. The disciple lives with his master and is formed more by the impact of his person than by his words. Thus the disciple is not simply a student who has to absorb a certain syllabus but he is a person who has to *grow*. The guru initiates him stage by stage into deeper insights as the disciple is ready and able to perceive them. The disciple receives not so much knowledge but *truth*, which is not found in books and cannot be tested by examinations. In the fulfilment of this task the master is God's own instrument; at times in some traditions he is actually divinised, since through him the Ultimate Truth, God Himself, is communicated to the disciple.

All this is consummately realized in Jesus' relationship to his disciples; but it receives its own distinct character, which arises not merely from the different cultural setting but from the person and mission of Jesus.

Discipleship in Jewish Tradition

In the Old Testament the idea of discipleship is almost absent. We do find followers of prophets as e.g. Elisha attaches himself to Elijah (1 Kings 19,19). However, a Jewish prophet is only the herald of God's message to the people, he does not become the centre of a group of disciples. God alone assembles his people and is the bond of their community. Only in the post-exilic period we find the idea of discipleship. It is centred not around prophets—there are no prophets any longer, they have been replaced by teachers of the law—but around rabbis, who embody various traditions, as they had developed in the Jewish community.

These rabbinical communities, then, were the pattern adopted by Jesus in gathering and forming his disciples. He initiated them into their new life not primarily by instructions but through the contacts of daily life. His followers were considered by the people as belonging to Jesus, their master. Thus people turn to his disciples in their misgivings about Jesus when, for example, they see him having meals with tax-collectors (Mk 2,16). Similarly, Jesus is held responsible for the behaviour of his disciples, when they do not fast as John's disciples had done, or when they pick grains on the Sabbath (Lk 5,33; 6,2).

"I have chosen you"

Still, there are deep differences between the disciples of Jesus and the disciples of the rabbis. The first distinctive feature in Jesus' discipleship is the manner of selection of followers. Among the Jews it was the disciple who chose the master who seemed best to correspond to the disciples' expectations. In the gospels, however, it is Jesus who chooses. In every one of the apostolic vocation accounts, the initiative of Jesus is emphasized. He calls the fisherboys from the shore of the lake. He tells Levi to follow him. When the twelve are elected from the larger group of followers to be "the twelve" we are told explicitly: "He called to him those whom he desired" (Mk 3,13). In John's gospel we read Jesus' words: "You did not choose me but I chose you and appointed

you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide (Jn 15,16).

The reason for this contrast lies in the very nature of Jesus' discipleship. For a young Jew the study of the law in the school of one of the rabbis was equivalent to choosing a career which gave him a place in society and a corresponding social status. For Jesus the call to discipleship is a strictly personal call, to be with him and to share his life and mission (cf. Mk 3, 13f). It is not the opening to a special profession or office (all this is to develop at a later stage and unfortunately often blurs the basic conception of a christian vocation). Jesus simply says: "Follow me!" (Mk 1,17, 2,14). The personal commitment to Jesus is the core of the Christian vocation.

The total surrender

From this follows the second difference in Jesus' discipleship: the absoluteness of the commitment to him. Rabbis did not separate their disciples from their families nor disturb their place in society. The groups of their disciples were accepted in the social and professional structure of the people. Rabbinical discipleship never implies a conflict with social traditions or accepted values.

It is different with Jesus and his followers. His outlook on life, on religious traditions and on society, sharply differs from that of his surroundings. His followers must be ready to stand by him against public opinion. Thus, when a large crowd follows him he is not happy with their enthusiasm. What they want is a hero according to their own mind and expectation but they will fall away when conflicts with family and traditions arise. Thus the hard words: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes even his own life, he cannot be my disciple" (Lk 14,26). "Hating" here means simply: Whatever comes between Jesus and his disciple to divert him from his commitment must be discarded. Nothing can take preference to Jesus, no natural ties of family or society. This does not imply a negative attitude towards life; Jesus loves life and came to bring it to fulness. He is not antisocial but builds community, heals rifts, reconciles, and praises

peacemakers. But his communion with people is based not on the natural ties of family or of social groups. Such ties bind together only limited sections of society, and, unless they are transcended, they lead to conflicts with other groups and become divisive forces. Jesus builds a new community of brothers and sisters for God's kingdom based on God's love: "My mother and brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it" (Lk 8,21).

This road leads Jesus and his disciples into an aloneness which is both rich and painful. It gives them the freedom to be themselves, free from fettering conventions and social prejudices. Jesus communicates with all, rich and poor, religious people and the rejected group of the tax-collectors. He is little concerned about the comments of the people. He also keeps his freedom in the observation of the law, because human needs and concern for the neighbour are more important than traditional customs. But Jesus has also to accept the consequences. He loses the social acceptance that seems so indispensable in our life. He is no longer really at home with tradition-bound people. He warns a would-be follower that, as his disciple, he has to forgo the basic need of all creatures to have their place of shelter: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Lk 9,58). Those who follow him must be ready resolutely to walk a lonely path: "No one who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God" (Lk 9,62).

Sharing in Jesus' passion

The radicality of these demands follows from the nature of Jesus' mission: He invites his disciples not only to an action programme to collaborate in a team, but to share in his life, in the realization of God's reign. It implies a radically new orientation of the entire person as it is embodied in Jesus himself. He never described this orientation systematically but simply invited the disciples to follow him, to "come and see" (cf. Jn 1,39), and in patient, often painful learning to enter into the meaning of his mission, his person. More and more his words to the disciples are concerned with the paschal mystery. Take the scene where two of the disciples ask for

the first places in his kingdom at his right and at his left (Mk 10,35-45). He asks them only: "Are you ready to drink the cup that I drink?", which means to share in his life, rejection and death. They think they are ready—but how much did they really understand? When the ten showed their annoyance with the two and felt jealous of them Jesus had to lay open the full meaning of discipleship: to share in his total self-gift to the Father. Jesus' disciples are not meant to strive for superiority or aim at places of domination. This is what all people do. It is the common feature of our society; "Those who are supposed to rule over the Gentiles lord it over them." Jesus demands the opposite: "It shall not be so among you. Whoever would be great among you must be your servant." This does not make sense in our competitive society, in the common struggle for survival and influence. People who refuse to take part in the race for a place in the sun will be pushed aside and trodden down. Jesus does not argue; it is impossible to argue about God's kingdom on merely logical grounds. He points to himself. He himself is the norm. His life, death and resurrection are the only guarantee that it is possible to live in this way: "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve and to lay down his life as a ransom for many". This is Jesus' only answer and explanation. It is not demonstrated in discussion but lived in his person.

Gradually the disciples must become familiar with the impending passion which concerns not only Jesus but also themselves: "I have chosen you out of this world, therefore the world hates you. The servant is not greater than his master. If they have persecuted me they will persecute you" (Jn 15,19). All this is summed up in the short formula of discipleship which is recorded in various contexts and wordings by all evangelists: "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it" (Mk 8,35). This is the ultimate meaning of human life in Jesus' vision: as long as we shelter ourselves, close ourselves into our own interests, the richness and beauty of our life are lost. True life means to be open, to be shared, to be centred not on the narrow ego and the horizon of individual needs but on the neighbour, the world, on God. If you close

your life, it is lost. If you find the courage to open your life, to share it, to give yourself to your neighbour, and ultimately to God, not only what you have but what you are, then certainly you shall find true life. This is Christ's uncompromising challenge.

Remain in me

Discipleship with Jesus never ends. This is the last difference between rabbinic discipleship and the following of Jesus. The time in the house of a rabbi was limited to the period of training. The goal of it was an independent life, when the young man would embark on his own work. This is natural, as each one has to live his own life in personal responsibility.

The discipleship of Jesus is different. In his words God speaks, and in his actions God is at work. He is the channel through which God's own life and love flow into our hearts, into our world. In Jesus we encounter God; we can never cease being open to God. Already in the days of Galilee the disciples felt close to God in Jesus' presence: so they asked him to teach them to pray (Lk 11,1). They experienced what Jesus said: "No one knows the Father except the Son and to whom the Son pleases to reveal him" (Mt 21,27). It is the core of his mission to reveal the Father. In John's gospel Philip asks Jesus to show them the Father. The question does not seem to make sense: "Have I been with you so long and yet you did not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father... Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?" (Jn 14, 8-10). Whoever comes into the presence of Jesus cannot help realizing the unique bond, the absorbing union between Jesus and his Father. For Jesus all creation is merely a shadow compared with the overwhelming reality of his Father. Jesus lives in his presence in a unique awareness of his love and care and of the mission that is entrusted to him. Whoever comes to Jesus with an open heart, sensitive to his inner life, must be aware also of the source of Jesus' freedom and strength, of the peace and assurance with which Jesus lives and moves—the powerful bond of love between Jesus and the Father.

Also in his glory Jesus remains our way to the Father. His disciples must remain united to him for ever; it is a bond of love that can never be broken. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; remain in my love!" (Jn 15,9). The parable of the vine and the branches is the last and fullest description of our union with Jesus. In the beginning Jesus invited the disciples to come and follow, to see and believe. Now he says: "*Abide in me and I in you*" (Jn 15,4). This union will have its fulfilment in the participation in Jesus' glory: "When I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also" (Jn 14,3).

Jesus is the beginning of the new creation, a new communion of people as brothers and sisters. This new creation does not grow through mere organisation. It is a life process; it starts with the small cell of Jesus' disciples in Galilee. It is meant to grow and embrace all men and women, the kingdom of God. Its beginnings are in our world; its fulfilment is the communion of saints in glory, with the Risen Lord.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus calls disciples* (Mk 1,16-20).

This is the very first deed of Jesus after returning from the wilderness. Mark places it immediately after the proclamation of the coming of God's kingdom. Jesus' message of a new world must be embodied in a community. Jesus gathers his disciples as the first cell of the worldwide communion of believers which will be his Body.

- "Passing along the sea of Galilee he saw Simon and Andrew": this beginning seems very casual, somewhere at the lake side, like meeting any ordinary fisherboys. This is God's Kingdom: not a display of power or glamour, it grows from the grassroots and takes place in our everyday world where Jesus passes and sees us — "Follow" — "Follow me": Mark tells us nothing about previous contacts (cf. Jn 1,35f). The shocking brevity and abruptness of the call expressed best the newness of their life with Jesus.

It will be centred on him only; henceforth their life will be formed and transformed by him.

- "I will make you fishers of men": Jesus not only teaches them but gives them a destiny of their own, a mission that will be totally beyond their own horizon. Discipleship of Jesus makes them part of God's reign which changes their heart and is meant to renew human society.
- "They left their nets and followed him": Jesus' call must be answered in freedom, in a commitment to him. For some it means a break with the past, a totally new beginning, others will be sent back into their own milieu to be witnesses of Jesus (cf. Mk 5,19).

2. *The Cost of Discipleship* (Lk 14,25-35).

- "Great multitudes accompanied him": Jesus loved the people, had compassion on them, gave them bread. Thus, many people crowded round him. But discipleship is something different, it demands a basic decision.
- "Anyone who does not hate father and mother... cannot be my disciple": "Hating" means whatever would come in between Jesus and his disciple must be discarded because following Jesus means more than all human relationships. It is God's own claim on our life before whom all human claims have to yield.
- "Whoever does not bear his cross and come after me cannot be my disciple": discipleship means not only to be with Jesus, but to live our own life with its burdens and conflicts through the power of Jesus.
- "If you build a tower... sit down and count the cost": this advice sounds unlike Jesus, who never counts costs, who also of his disciples asks a full self-gift beyond rational calculations. Still, Jesus does not want his followers to come to him with illusions; they must know that the commitment to him is radical. Each one must ask himself whether he is ready for it.

- “When going to war measure first your own strength”: in this second parable Jesus points to the conflict with the surrounding world, with our own selfishness for which his followers must be prepared.
- “Whoever does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple”: this should be the prayer of this day of retreat, to receive the clear insight into the joy, but also into the demands of discipleship, and to receive the strength to make and to live this commitment to the end.
- “If salt loses its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored?”: will Jesus’ disciples live up to his call? Many of those committed to his service resign themselves to mediocrity. The Book of Revelation says: “Because you are lukewarm, neither cold nor hot, I will spew you out of my mouth” (Rev 3,16).

3. *The Decisiveness in following Jesus*

(Sp. Ex. nn. 149-157).

Orientations for our life are of little use unless they are followed by decisions. Thus to the meditations of the 2nd week, which give guiding norms (the two banners, p. 150; the three degrees of humility p. 153ff), a reflection on decision making is added. It consists in a case story taken from daily experience. A man has accumulated much money by not very fair ways and he is confronted with the problem of what to do about it. The meditation tells us to reflect on the right way of facing decisive situations in our life.

The story seems quite ordinary, still, Ignatius gives it the most solemn setting: “to see myself standing in the presence of God Our Lord and all his Saints that I may desire and know what is more pleasing to his divine Goodness.” In the concreteness of our daily decisions the very meaning of our life is at stake.

Three possible attitudes are proposed:

1. *Drifting and procrastination*: The owner of the money wants to do something about it but post-

pones the decision for "tomorrow". Nothing will ever happen. You may think of actual problems in your own life. You feel the need of coming to grips with them, but you drift along. Problems will not be solved by drifting and putting off a basic decision.

2. *Reservations and laying down conditions*: The owner wants to do something about the money but has decided already to keep it. This is not readiness to fulfil one's duty but the futile attempt to calm one's conscience and to manipulate God's will according to one's own intentions and desires. We do this in a thousand ways in daily life: we cling to our own plans, ambitions, aspirations, and then try to justify them and to camouflage them as God's service. Only a serious discernment in full openness to the guidance of the Holy Spirit can lead us out of this impasse of self-deception.

3. *Surrender unconditionally to God's will*: "They seek only to will and not will as God our Lord inspires them, and as seems better for the service and praise of the Divine Majesty". The choice must be made, not avoided; it must be made in total openness to God's will.

This meditation is not an exercise in abstract principles but an ultimate, fundamental effort to come to grips with the concreteness of our life and to cut through the manifold entanglements that hold us back from the simple, total self-gift to God.

We are recommended in prayer to turn: (1) first to Mary who committed herself without reservation to God; (2) next to Jesus, who knew only the will of his Father even when it meant the way of the cross (3) finally, to God the Father whose love is the only norm and source of our life. We pray that we may be able to offer up our life to his love and service.

OTHER READINGS:

— Mt 8, 18-22: hesitant disciples.

- 2 Cor 2, 14-17: the fragrance of Jesus spread by his disciples.
- Phil 2, 12-18: the light shining in darkness.

QUESTIONS:

1. Jesus found in his disciples ambition, a lack of faith, etc. What does he find in me?
2. Examine yourself about the attitude of procrastination; of making conditions in your response to Jesus' call.

REFLECTION:

“If you would extol Christianity, oh, do not wish for yourself the tongues of angels nor the art of all poets, nor the eloquence of all orators. In the same degree in which your life shows how much you have forsaken for the sake of it, in the same degree you extol Christianity”.

KIERKEGAARD

PART III

THE NARROW PATH

THE THIRD WEEK

Before narrating Jesus' farewell from his disciples on the eve of the passion, John indicates the unique significance of the last section of his gospel. "When Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father..." (Jn 13, 1). John speaks of Jesus' hour. Jesus was conscious of this supreme hour (cf. also Lk 22, 14). In biblical language the hour is not simply a period in the even flow of time but indicates the decisiveness of the situation. Jesus' life and mission reach their climax. In his passion, death and resurrection the meaning of his coming, his work and preaching is fulfilled and revealed. In the last events of his life we see who Jesus really is, what God's reign, proclaimed by him, means and in what way this reign of God is to be realized in our world.

In each gospel Jesus' passion and resurrection form a distinct part clearly marked off from the preceding narration. Yet at the same time the passover events are the continuation and conclusion of Jesus' life and mission, the outcome of the growing conflict with the leaders of the people. In fact, Jesus' condemnation and crucifixion would be unintelligible without viewing the growing estrangement and the ever widening separation of Jesus from the ruling class. For the meditations of the third week of the Spiritual Exercises both the continuity between Jesus' life and passion and the clear distinctiveness of the Paschal Mystery in the gospel narrative are important.

If Jesus' passion and death are considered in isolation from his earthly life they are deprived of their significance in Jesus' own life and of their relevance for Jesus' disciples. The trend towards an independent and isolated understanding of Jesus' death is found already in the New Testament, when it

speaks about his blood in terms of Jewish rituals, of sacrifice and expiation. But for the apostolic communities these terms were immediately understood as interpretations of the historical events in Jerusalem of which they were fully conscious. Later theology, however, tended to reflect on Jesus' death more and more independently of the actual events, of Jesus' conflict with the political powers of his time and of the religious legalism of his adversaries. Thus seen, his death was no longer an integral part, the final conclusion of his earthly mission but rather became a general theology of sacrifice and satisfaction.

For the retreatant the context of Jesus' passion with his earthly life is significant because the third week is not a general reflection on the meaning of suffering. It is a school in following Jesus on the way of the cross. For Jesus the death on the cross is the consequence of his commitment to God's reign against the powers of evil, the price he has to pay for his obedience to the Father and his love for us till the end. The retreatant too has made his option for God's kingdom in the second week. So he finds in the meditations on Jesus' passion the invitation to follow the master also into the darkness of suffering and rejection.

Yet, in spite of this continuity, there is something entirely new in the passion accounts, which again is significant for the retreatant. During his earthly life Jesus himself controlled the development of his mission. There was a time of preaching and addressing the crowds, of indictments and of challenges to those in power. There was also a time of withdrawal because his hour had not yet come. Now a new situation arises. Jesus seems no longer master of his destiny. He gives up the control of events and abandons himself to powers which are outside him. The disciples still want to take up the fight against the enemies in the garden. Jesus refuses. He tells the soldiers: "This is your hour and the power of darkness" (Lk 22,53). Yet even the powers of evil are subject to God's design: "Shall I not drink the cup which my Father has given me?" (Jn 18,11). God is also at work in the hour of darkness.

Thus Jesus shares in our life even in the night of death. With us he enters into the inscrutability of God. God's reign

prevails where human efforts are exhausted. Jesus surrenders to the ultimate mystery of God.

The retreatant has to do the same. The third week of the Spiritual Exercises has a different atmosphere. The retreatant finds himself in the presence of the ultimate mystery. In the second week he has made his option with Jesus. Now he discovers himself with Jesus in a realm where his own planning and reasoning have come to an end. He shares in the total aloneness of Jesus who is abandoned by all while he fulfills the ultimate self-gift of love—his surrender to God on the cross.

THE LAST SUPPER

When Jesus entered his passion the disciples were scattered. It is part of his passion that in this last stage of his earthly life he is alone without any human support. Still, precisely in this paschal mystery Jesus is more *intimately united with his own* than in any other situation during his whole earthly life. His passion concerns all. His followers and all people have to go through their own passion, to carry their own cross and to learn from Jesus' passion the ultimate surrender to God, to find the door to true freedom and salvation.

Thus where and when Jesus is most alone he is closest to his own. This closeness will not be realized by the disciples in the dark hours of Good Friday, but they must experience it at the entrance into his passion during the last meal he had with them. Jesus wanted that in this last hour his friends realize once more in a unique way what he was to them, what he would be for his Church for ever. They should be aware of the depth of their union with him and among themselves in him. They should have a foretaste of their final union which they would find only after his death when, as the Risen Lord, he will gather them again for their mission.

Therefore this hour of the last supper will remain for ever in the memory of his disciples not only as a dear remembrance but as the ever new celebration of his self-gift for them and their union with him.

The Paschal feast

It is the national feast of the Jews on which they commemorated the great events in their history, the liberation from the slavery in Egypt, the day on which *Jahweh made them his own people* like "an eagle spreading out his wings over his young, bearing them on his pinions" (Deut 32,11). On this day they felt one nation, coming together from all towns and villages and from distant countries. They were conscious of their unique place among the nations because Yahweh had made them "His own possession among all peoples" (Ex 19,5). They needed this celebration, the day on which they forgot the drudgery of their daily life and the humiliation of living under the rule of the Romans. On this day they became aware with deep gratitude of God's gift. Jerusalem was vibrating with the joy and pride of the nation because they were conscious—this was their faith—that it was not only in olden days that God liberated them from slavery, but on this day God was setting them free.

What is Jesus' place in these celebrations? How will he take part in the rituals of the feast? Jesus lived in the Jewish traditions and cherished them. It pained him, and he spoke harsh words, when he saw how the sacred traditions were often reduced to empty ceremonies. For him Jerusalem was the holy city and the temple was his Father's house. The Passover was the celebration of God's love and power for his people. It was a feast with the promise of the kingdom, a victory over the powers of darkness, a new and lasting covenant, a new communion among all nations as brothers and sisters.

It had been his mission to proclaim the coming of God's reign, God's new community. It had begun to take shape in the small group of Jesus' disciples. In this last celebration of the passover with them they should experience the nature of this new community.

The Community of the disciples

The passover celebration is particularly apt to convey to the disciples the spirit of *the new community* as they have to live it. It is a meal which for Jesus is the most telling symbol of community. When he describes the final fulfilment of the

kingdom of God he visualises it as a great banquet, with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob presiding, and the nations coming together from East and West. Even after the resurrection his disciples recognized him in a meal, by the breaking of the bread. In this gesture of sharing they realized that he was truly with them again. Thus all four gospel accounts present the last supper as a celebration of community.

John centres his description on the *washing of the feet*. The meal is an obvious occasion for rivalries, and Luke refers to the renewed dispute among the disciples jostling for the better places (Lk 22,24). In this context he reports Jesus' sayings about authority which, in God's kingdom, does not consist in domination, as among Gentiles, but in service (Lk 22,24-27; Mk 10,43-45). For John this becomes the central message of the last supper. Jesus washes the feet of the disciples and wants his action to be understood as a norm for the disciples. He is "teacher and Lord"; and they recognise him as such. He has authority but exercises it only in service: teaching the people, healing, struggling against the evils in society, forming and inspiring his followers. Jesus sees his life as service, and the disciples must learn that mutual service, giving and receiving it, is the very essence of their relationship. This is Jesus' answer to Peter when he refuses that his feet be washed by him: "You have no part with me". All must learn it: "You also must wash each other's feet". Jesus gave the example that the disciples have to follow, because the servant is not greater than his master. It is the substance of the Christian community: "If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

The Eucharist

What John tells us in this scene of the washing of the feet, the Synoptics convey in their narration of the last supper. Jesus followed the traditional procedure. After preparatory rituals the meal is solemnly opened by the prayer of the father of the family, praising God for the gifts he has bestowed on his people in the great days of their history. God had taken from them the yoke of servitude in an alien land, had guided them through the desert and had provided for them and had given them the land he had promised to their fathers. This land was

bread and prosperity for them. For Israel bread became the silent symbol of God's faithful love, unobtrusive, taken for granted in daily meals, but God's care is embodied in it. Bread must be *broken and shared*. In this way it becomes a symbol also of community. On this evening, when the Jews celebrated God's love and power, every father of the family held bread in his hands, said grace and shared it with his own.

Jesus is now performing this ritual at the beginning of the passover meal. He does it in a new community. New is this community because it is bound together in a new way, more powerful than by the ancient traditions, by the person of Jesus. In his company they had learned what God's kingdom really is, not an astounding miracle falling from heaven but the new togetherness in brotherhood with Jesus as the centre, a community with no barriers, comprising all people. Jesus had been with them with his daily concern, teaching and guiding them. In this hour of farewell they realized this communion in a unique way. His self-gift to them finds its ultimate expression.

Jesus, like all other Jews, holds the bread in his hands, and, according to tradition, says the blessing. But he ends the prayer in a new way with the astonishing conclusion: "Take and eat, *this is my body*". He gives himself. His "body" means his whole being, his life, as God had given it to him, as he gave it to his Father. "A body you have given to me. . . Behold, I come" (Hebr 10,5). This body, this life, which totally belongs to God, is now given to us. Jesus gave it to the people every day of his life, it will be given to them more fully in his death and finally in his glory. The bread, broken and shared, will for ever be the sign through which he gives himself to his disciples.

He tells them to take this bread, which is his body. "Taking" implies an active acceptance. Never can communion with Jesus consist in passively receiving him. It always is personal communion in faith and discipleship, in order to be transformed by him. Jesus' mission must be realized in his communities, in new life and new brotherhood, in cells of God's kingdom that are to pervade and transform the world. To take this bread is a commitment to Jesus' mission.

He tells them to eat it. Bread is to be eaten. In the bible

there lives still something of the mystical meaning of eating (cf Rev 10,9-11). Ancient Indian wisdom knows this: *what you eat, you become*. In eating we allow the food to become part of ourselves. Those who eat of this bread make Jesus' life and mission their own: "You cannot partake of the table of the Lord and the table of demons" (1 Cor 10,21). Eating the Eucharist becomes the uniting bond of the community: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the same bread" (1 Cor 10,17).

The Paschal meal went on. Next Jesus and his disciples ate the roasted lamb. The feast moves towards its climax, the solemn conclusion which consisted of the great Hallel, Psalms 113 and 114, the joyful praise of God for the covenant. The third cup of wine was filled. This was called the "cup of blessing" to be shared by the participants in the meal. It was the cup of the covenant. With the coming of God's kingdom in Christ this covenant becomes new. God's people is no longer segregated from other nations. It is the communion of all in God's love without dividing walls. Jesus had lived this covenant in the union with his Father and the self gift to the disciples, to all. Tomorrow he will seal it with his blood. Blood is life — this was the understanding of the Jews. Blood flows in my veins, the blood which is my life. Jesus' blood will be poured out, it is meant to become my life, the life of the world. This is the new covenant in his blood for the eternal life of all.

Jesus holds the cup in his hands: "*This cup*", he says, "*is my blood, the blood of the new covenant, poured out for the multitude of people*". And once more he adds: "Take it and drink it". It is not enough to receive Jesus' love. Love must become the pervading and unifying presence of God among the people. In drinking it we make Jesus' life and love our own.

This hour of the last supper sums up the entire mission and message of Jesus. It is the celebration of God's reign embodied and revealed in Jesus. It has to unfold down through the ages in many forms, but it will, it must, always keep the same features. God's love is revealed in Jesus. It is accepted by his disciples and realized in their lives. It binds them into a community with the assurance that our world and our history are moving towards the fulfilment of God's

love. Thus Jesus adds: "*Do this as a memorial of me*". This hour is to remain alive in all communities of his disciples, not as a nostalgic remembrance of his farewell but in the consciousness of his continued presence in their midst to be the source and inspiration of their life, the bond of their community, the joy of their mission and the assurance of fulfilment.

This, then, is the meaning of the eucharistic celebration. It is the celebration of our union, of the union of the whole Church, with Jesus. We call it a *sacrifice* because Jesus' own life, his very being, is to go to his Father, to be with his Father. Whoever comes to Jesus and is united to him in the Eucharist is drawn by the power of Jesus into this movement to God. The surrender to Jesus in the Eucharist is at its very core a sacrifice, a self-gift to God. It can be conceived in two ways: it is the believer's self-gift to God in and through Jesus Christ, or it is the self-gift of Jesus to his Father realized anew in the community of the faithful. Just as a brooklet merges its water into the mighty current of a stream that irresistibly moves towards the ocean, so believers merge their sacrifice with that of Jesus.

This union is also *sacrament*: God's gift to us of Jesus his Son comprises all the gifts of creation and salvation. It is even more: he who in true faith receives this sacrament and is united to Jesus becomes himself a bearer of God's saving love. Thus in the Eucharist the whole Church, the community of all believers, becomes "sacrament, sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men" (L.G. n. 1).

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The Eucharist in the community of Corinth* (1 Cor 11, 17-34).

The Eucharist is the centre of the Christian community. It is open to misuse. It can become a monotonous ritual. The greatest danger, however, is the loss of its innermost meaning as the source of unity among the believers.

— "In this I do not praise you": Paul uses hard words. The Corinthians, who glory in their gifts of the Spirit,

do not know what community is. There are parties (cf. 1 Cor 1,12); the poor are publicly humiliated.

- “I have received from the Lord.”: Paul does not give his private opinion but proposes Jesus’ own message.
- “On the night he was betrayed”: the attitude of the Christian towards his neighbour has its pattern in Jesus’ total self-gift to his disciples even in the face of their betrayal of him.
- “Everyone should examine himself”: Participation in the Eucharist is a commitment to Jesus’ spirit, to community, a call to mutual esteem, reconciliation, brotherliness. Failures in charity, which are unavoidable, must not become the rule, as in Corinth.
- “Wait for one another . . .”: the harmony of a Christian community is shown in mutual concern and consideration.

2. *Food for the Pilgrim People* (Jn. 6)

God’s care for his people is fulfilled in Jesus: Yahweh had given them bread in the desert (Ex 16,6-27); so Jesus feeds those who follow him (6, 1-14).

New is the way in which Jesus gives bread: he uses the bread of the boy and has it distributed through the disciples. God’s gift comes through human hands. This is God’s reign.

- “I am the bread of life”: (6,35) most of all, the bread is new; it is Jesus himself, given to us not for the transient pilgrimage only, but for eternal life.
- “This is the will of my Father, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life” (6,40): to give us life, Jesus must be received in faith.
- “He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him”: (6,56) the union in faith is crowned in the sacramental union with Jesus. Every eucharistic celebration begins with the word of God in order to awaken the faith of the believers. This leads to the eucharistic communion with Christ.

- “No one can come to me unless it is granted him by my Father” (6,65): God alone is our Saviour, but he speaks to us, and gives himself to us in Jesus, his Son.

OTHER READINGS:

- 1 Cor 10,14-17: To become one body in Christ.
— 1 Cor 13: Love is the highest gift.
— Phil 1,3-11: The Apostle’s love for his community.

QUESTIONS:

1. What place has the Eucharist in my life? Have I understood it as the sacrament of union with Jesus and my brothers and sisters?
2. Has the frequent participation in the Eucharist made its celebration monotonous? How can I make it more personal?

FOR REFLECTION:

“You ask what you should offer. Offer yourself. What else does the Lord seek of you but yourself In the whole of creation he has made nothing better than you. He seeks you from you, because you had lost yourself.”

AUGUSTINE, *serm.* 48, *cp.* 2

JESUS ENTERS THE PASSION

Jesus' passion is the most frequent topic of meditation among his disciples. In the third week of the Spiritual Exercises these meditations should be made so that they help the retreatant in realizing the goal of the retreat, *finding God's will through a deeper union with Jesus*.

Saint Ignatius tells us in these meditations "to ask for sorrow, compassion and shame because the Lord is going to his suffering for my sins" (n. 193). Each of these attitudes, however, must be understood correctly. Sadness is not a mood of depression but the painful awareness of our distorted world where truth is crushed by lies and God's image seems to be erased from our human face. In these meditations we are sad not only for the cruelties committed in Jesus' trial but for what is taking place today, in our society, in God's own Church.

It would also divert us from the purpose of the Spiritual Exercises to reduce compassion to pity. Jesus does not want to be pitied; he freely enters his passion. Ignatius tells us to contemplate Jesus who "desires to suffer" (n. 195). Compassion means partaking in Jesus' sufferings, entering into his darkness and pain which he shares with us because he becomes a member of our human family. For Jesus the passion is part and parcel of his struggle against the powers of darkness.

This, then, is the meditation of the day: to contemplate Jesus as his life moves towards the shadows of suffering and death, how he faces the powers of destruction.

Jesus' human experience

Jesus' passion does not begin at the end of his life; it grows from the human experience which he shares with all of us. In each stage of our life we leave something behind, its joy and beauty; so it was also in Jesus' life. At times Jesus is depicted as if he had lived from the beginning in the consciousness of this final sacrifice which awaited him. It is, of course, true that every human life moves irrevocably towards its own end. Augustine says: "When we are born, we begin to die." As to Jesus, we also know that he was born to be our Saviour through the death on the cross. Still, it would be wrong to think of Jesus living his life like the rehearsal of a ready-made programme, acting out, as it were, a role which he had learned beforehand. He lived a genuine human life, and there is no biblical evidence, nor any convincing theological reason for assuming that he knew his future from the beginning.

So we should think of Jesus not just as sharing only or mainly our sorrows but he fully shares our joys and the richness of our human life. He had a happy childhood sheltered in his home, in peaceful rural surroundings as they are reflected still in the stories and parables of his later teaching. Nature was the picture book which Jesus used to illustrate his teaching about the Father and his care for us. He could enjoy the peace of this world even more deeply with his unique awareness of God's presence and love when he observed the birds of the sky who never worry about tomorrow and the matchless beauty of the flowers though they blossom only for a day. How much more will the Father care for his own children?

Farewell to Nazareth

Jesus' passion begins with the farewell to Nazareth. He outgrows childhood, and becomes increasingly aware of his wider surroundings, of the hardships and sufferings of the people and the helplessness of the poor. He knows his Father, his love and concern. God wants a different world: God's kingdom must come, his love and power will overcome the narrowness and selfishness which dominate our world. The vision of a new humanity, of brotherhood and love takes shape in him. He has to set out from his hometown on his mission.

His mission separates him from his family. The impact of this farewell on Jesus is conveyed to us only in an indirect manner, in the reaction of Mary. She comes to Capernaum, the new centre of his activities, to see him. They gave the message to Jesus that his mother wants to see him. But Jesus lives in a new world. Mary has to learn that Jesus has a new family, the community of his followers: "Who is my mother and my brothers?" and looking round on those who sat around him, he said, "Here are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of God is my brother, sister, mother" (Mk 3,31-35). This new family of Jesus is bound together not by human bonds but by God's word. Jesus' relation to Mary is not broken, it is reversed: no longer is Jesus the obedient child of Mary, but she becomes a disciple. In fact, Luke introduces Mary as the first who listens to God's message and allows her life totally to be guided by his word. In the first chapter of the Acts of the Apostles she is among Jesus' disciples in the prayer for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1,14), and John sees her under the cross together with only one disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (Jn 19,25). But in his earthly life Jesus walks a solitary path with no home for himself: "Foxes have holes, birds have nests. The Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Mt 8,20). The departure from Nazareth was his first farewell.

Still, a new world opens before Jesus. It is hard. There is the ever recurring temptation to an easier life, a shortcut to success. But he has committed himself to his Father's will and mission. He opens the eyes of the people to a new vision of life and to a world where God's love flows through all the channels of human relations in a communion of brotherhood and freedom. There is a fascinating power in his proclamation of a new society where the poor will be blessed and the hungry will have to eat, and where the simple people, who have no power and had been bent low, will possess the land. What inner freedom and strength vibrates in his challenges to those who look down on others in hypocritical self-righteousness, against the ruling class of those who hold power and social status. It is difficult to imagine a happier, richer life, not in the sense in which most people think of happiness in terms of comfort and social prestige, but of a man who lives his life fully,

his own life, from the depth of his being, sure of his mission and fearless of any power on earth, because he knows God is with him.

The Crisis of his mission

In these first stages of Jesus' prophetic life the pain of the farewell to Nazareth seems more than compensated by the new horizons that open before him. Soon, however, he realizes that resistance against him is stiffening. The leading circles of the people are hostile and the masses waver and drift away. Jesus finds his impact limited to a small group of followers. The Synoptics describe this crisis in the scene of Caesarea Philippi (cf p. 149), John depicts it in the scene in the synagogue at Capernaum. Jesus had fed the multitudes with bread, and enthusiastic masses gather round him once more. But now he begins to speak of his real mission, not only to give bread for the body but bread from heaven. He himself is this bread: "I am the bread of life . . . if anyone eats of this bread he will live for ever". They begin to leave him, only the disciples remain loyal: "You have words of eternal life" (Jn 6, 60-68).

It is the hour of decline. In Mark's narration Jesus now begins to speak about his passion. He realizes that by human estimation his mission has failed, the mission entrusted to him by his Father. It is the painful experience of being rejected and deserted. His path becomes more narrow, steeper, leading to death. But the twelve are still with him.

The loss of his disciples

The gospels tell us of a further stage in his farewell, even more painful: the breaking up of his intimate circle of the twelve which dramatically takes place in the passion itself, yet which has its forebodings already before. There are, for example, the repeated references to the "one who would betray him" (Mk 3, 18; Jn 6, 70f). In their passion stories all the Synoptics tell us about that most painful situation during the last supper, in this unique celebration of communion, when the traitor is still with them. "One of you will betray me, one who is eating with me" (Mk 14, 18). John

gives the scene in more detail, with a last assurance by Jesus of his love for Judas; but Judas opts out, to move into the darkness (Jn 13, 21-30).

The eleven who remain with Jesus are, according to the gospels, still under the spell and support of his personality, unaware of their own weakness. But Jesus sees it. A gulf begins to separate the disciples from Jesus. With full conviction Peter can dare to say: "Lord I am ready to go with you to prison and death". Jesus knows better: "The cock will not crow this day until you three times deny that you know me" (Lk 22,31-34). The others also will desert him: "You will all fall away, for it is written: I will strike the shepherd and the sheep will be scattered" (Mk 14,26f). The inner cohesion among the disciples and Jesus is broken. The assuring words spoken by Peter and the other disciples seem to come from an infinite distance. The more Jesus moves towards his end, the deeper is his aloneness. Only his Father remains. "The hour is coming, indeed it has come, when you will be scattered, every man to his home, and will leave me alone; yet I am not alone, for the Father is with me" (Jn 16,32).

This is Jesus' last journey with his apostles. He goes out with the eleven through the festive city which still rings with the joy of the feast, crosses the dark Kedron valley on the way to the garden of Gethsemane. He leaves the disciples behind: "Stay here while I pray". Even the inner three are left behind: "My soul is very sorrowful, even unto death, remain here and watch". When Jesus comes back he finds them sleeping. In utter loneliness he can now speak only to God: "*Abba*, my Father" (Mk 14, 32-41).

"For our sins"

This entry of Jesus into his passion is inseparably connected with his mission, the proclamation of God's reign, and the uncompromising indictment of all powers which marshal themselves against it. These powers have different names; each of Jesus' adversaries has his own reason to reject him. In fact, it is surprising that in the attack against Jesus the Sadducees and Pharisees combine together, whereas otherwise they are enemies. The common ground on which

they meet against him is the rejection of God's reign. They would, of course, have raised a solemn protest against such an insinuation. They all pretended to stand on the side of God. The crime of which they accuse Jesus and the title under which they condemn him is blasphemy: Jesus insults God, when he claims divine authority for his teaching (Mk 14, 63f). They reject Jesus in the name of their God.

This precisely is the issue between Jesus and them all: which God? For the Sadducees God guarantees the stability of their power position. They exercise their authority in his name. For the Pharisees God is the support of their righteousness and superiority. This God gave the law and gave dignity to those who keep it. Each enemy of Jesus has made God the support of his own position: social, political, economic, religious. Each adversary has constructed his own little kingdom for which he claims God's divine authority. This is, however, their own kingdom, not God's reign. Jesus has no kingdom of his own. He knows only God's reign. So all of his enemies are troubled; they feel threatened by him. It is their sin that they have made use of God for their own purpose, to strengthen their ego, to assure their glory before men, to support their power in order that they may continue to rule over their neighbour. Sin has a thousand forms and disguises. In this festival of sin, in which everyone celebrates himself in the name of God, Jesus stands alone, becomes ever more alone with his Father.

My part in Jesus' passion

In the contemplation of Jesus' passion the retreatant is not an outside observer. He himself is involved. Ignatius wants us to realise that the Lord is going to his suffering "for my sins" (n. 193).

There is no need to imagine (as it is done at times) that we took part in Jesus' crucifixion. It simply means that I am part of this sinful world in which Jesus was born and for which he has now to suffer. I too have allowed the powers of sin and selfishness to penetrate my life. I see myself with shame in the ranks of those who under whatever disguises reject God's reign and resist Jesus.

These meditations are meant to clarify and strengthen the decision against sin in the first week and to confirm and deepen the option for Jesus against the powers of darkness in the second week of the Spiritual Exercises. In the light of Jesus' life, of his relentless struggle which leads him into the solitude of the passion, I begin to see more clearly the conflict in my own life and mission. Once I have made the option for Jesus I also see the implications for myself, to follow Jesus' lonely path and to have no ultimate support but God.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus' agony in the garden*

(Mk 14, 32-42; Lk 22, 40-46)

- "He began to be greatly distressed and troubled": this is the moment of Jesus' passion. He has ended his work and struggle. It is the time to allow the powers beyond his control, to take over and have their way. It is the threshold between life and death.
- "Sit here while I pray": Jesus leaves human support and companionship behind: his only support is his Father.
- "*Abba*, Father": Jesus' agony is the context in which Mark gives us this special word with which Jesus used to address God. In its intimacy "*Abba*" contains both his total obedience-unto-death and his total confidence that even death has its place and meaning in God's mystery.
- "Remove this cup from me": Jesus makes his own the prayer of millions who face pain and death. The letter to the Hebrews is even more explicit: "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death" (Hebr 5, 7).
- "Not what I will but what you will": this is his surrender to God's will and Jesus' response to that mystery which is beyond human understanding, the mystery of redemptive suffering.
- "And there appeared to him an angel from heaven strengthening him": the prayer of Jesus changes

nothing of the coming events, but Jesus in prayer receives the strength to bear it.

- “In an agony he prayed more earnestly and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground”: Jesus is broken but his union with the Father is unshakably strong.
- “Simon, are you asleep? Could you not watch one hour?”: Peter is addressed intimately by his own name, not with the name Jesus had given him. In this scene Simon Peter appears in his human weakness.
- “Watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation”: Jesus is more concerned about the disciples than himself. In the impending hour of crisis watchfulness and prayer are needed.
- “It is enough, the hour has come. The Son of man is betrayed into the hands of sinners. Rise, let us be going, my betrayer is at hand”: once more Jesus has renewed his option, left utterly alone by the sleeping disciples. Jesus has consistently faced his life and mission with firmness and clarity; so now he faces up to his death with this same single-minded fortitude.

2. *The Hour of darkness* (Mk 14, 43-51; Lk 22, 47-54).

- “A crowd arrived with swords and clubs”: Jesus’ inner struggle is over: the brutal reality of the passion begins. This is their answer to Jesus’ proclamation of justice and love, of God’s reign.
- “Judas, would you betray the Son of man with a kiss?”: The sign which Judas had given the enemies was that of friendship and devoted discipleship. A kiss now becomes the sign of betrayal.
- “Lord, shall we strike with the sword?”: Jesus knows no violence. God’s reign has no other weapons but truth and love. Violence divides, creates new hatred, reduces the struggle between light and darkness to a duel of physical power. Luke adds Jesus’ gesture of healing the ear of the wounded enemy.
- “And they all forsook him and fled”: His disciples would have been ready to fight: this is their natural

instinct. But they are not ready to suffer with Jesus. They have not yet learned that loyalty of faith which lasts also where exterior supports fail.

- “This is your hour and the power of darkness”: Jesus surrenders to the powers against which he had been struggling. It seems like his defeat. “They seized him and led him away”. In and through these powers of darkness, however, God’s own design will be realised. In the surrender to his enemies, Jesus surrenders himself to God.

These reflections can easily be continued in the meditations:—on Jesus’ trial before the High Priest and the Sanhedrin; on Peter’s denial of knowing him; on the mockery of Jesus: on his condemnation.

OTHER READINGS:

- Any of the passion accounts will be suitable for this day.
- Is 52, 13-53, 12: The suffering Servant.
- Ps 22: Abandonment to God in suffering.

QUESTIONS:

1. Have I experienced in my life the ‘going out’ into darkness, leaving behind precious values?
2. Do I come across the powers of darkness and destruction in my personal life, in my surroundings: hatred, betrayal, cruelty, calumny? How do I face and encounter these?

FOR REFLECTION:

“Since the mission of the Church continues and unfolds in the course of history the mission of Christ himself who was sent to evangelise the poor, the Church, guided by the Spirit of Christ, must follow the same path that Christ followed, namely the way of poverty, obedience, service and self-sacrifice even unto death, from which he through the resurrection came forth as victor. This is the way the Apostles followed in hope, and by much trouble and suffering they filled up what was lacking in the sufferings of Christ for his body, which is the Church. Often enough blood was the seed of Christians” (Vat. II, *Mission Decree*, n. 5).

WITH US — FOR US

"Christ was without sin, but for our sake God made him share our sin in order that in union with him we might share the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5,21).

These chapters on Jesus' passion do not give a detailed exposition of the Gospel accounts; the retreatant will use them at his convenience. In the Spiritual Exercises we attempt to understand Jesus' suffering and death as the ultimate manifestation of his mission, of his very being. We enter into the inner sphere of Jesus because *his* mission becomes *our* mission. His presence in the world must be embodied in our lives, and his passion and saving death must be shared by his Church. These meditations may help the retreatant to realize Jesus' saving love and presence in his own life.

"You must name him Jesus because he is the one who is to save his people from their sins" (Mt 1,20).

This is the angel's message to Joseph: the child to be born from Mary will be Saviour. His mission is enshrined in his name. He will save us from sin and death — and death includes all its satellites, the countless forms of pain, destruction, desolation. He will save us not through spectacular deeds — in ancient myths we read of saviour-gods who subdued demons of darkness through superhuman feats or cunning tricks — Jesus is Saviour simply by being born as our brother, sharing our life, struggle and death, similar to us in all things but sin, a

fellow pilgrim on our journey to lead us from sin and death to true life.

We need salvation not only from physical evils, from illness and poverty. Salvation concerns our whole being and our human society. Ailments of the body, diseases and even death, are not the ultimate tragedy of human life as long as we are included in a community of love, God's own love. This is the core of Jesus' message of salvation: God's reign is coming. At last it must come true what prophetic visions had promised: "I will be their God and they shall be my people" (Jer 31,33). All are included in God's love, all are united in a new community of brotherhood.

In this community the powers of evil will be conquered. Jesus not only teaches about God's love for us, his care for all, he also heals. He restores ailing bodies, blind eyes and crippled limbs, and so he inaugurates the new creation: "The blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear and the dead are raised up, and the poor have the good news preached to them" (Mt 11,5f).

The gospels lay special emphasis on the exorcisms of evil spirits. Nowhere, according to the view of the Jews at Jesus' time, the powers of evil were more shockingly revealed than in possessed people. Degrading and destructive powers get hold of the very core of the human person. Jesus is stronger. In the first encounter with an evil spirit, according to Mark, the demon asks the question which focuses on the very core of Jesus' mission: "What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy one of God" (Mk 1,24). This is salvation. God's love overcomes the powers of evil, God's own reign is coming: "If it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the reign of God has come upon you" (Lk 11,20).

Salvation through love

We need salvation — can anyone save us? Obviously some evils can be removed or at least alleviated. Our technical progress offers us undreamt of possibilities of medical aid, comfort, prosperity. But the evils of our world persist, they even grow. Greed has devastated much of our most beautiful

inheritance, God's nature; it actually threatens to turn our world into a desert. The tools for building a better world are in our hands but they can equally be used for mutual destruction. The evil has its roots in our heart: "Out of our heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, fornication, theft..." (Mt 15,19). It is futile to combat the evils of the outside world, they are only symptoms of the deadly disease that has infected our world: selfishness with its thousand faces and masks, disguises and camouflages; segregation from the neighbour, division, jealousies, hostile rivalry. Each one is concerned with his own ego, building his own small kingdom. Real salvation means change not of the world but of human hearts. But who can change hearts? No one has the key to his neighbour's heart where he reigns in sovereign freedom. No one can touch this freedom, it is respected by God himself.

A heart is changed only when it learns to love. In true love we surrender the keys of our heart to our neighbour, ultimately to God. Doors which cannot be crushed from outside are opened freely from within. But how can we learn to love?

This is the mystery of our salvation through Jesus: he became my brother, he loves. God's love has embodied itself in his human heart. It is no longer a message from infinite distance, that God in high heaven cares for us. It has become real in this world of ours. He saved us by sharing our life and inviting us, on our part, to share in his love, in God's love, to become a community of love.

Love suffers

This love of Jesus for us, his unbreakable solidarity with our sinful world, leads Jesus to his passion, step by step.

Jesus loved the poor who were hungry, whose life was filled with tears. Jesus' concern for the oppressed and exploited became the focal point of Luke's gospel. He places the scene of Nazareth (which surely took place at a later stage) at the beginning of Jesus' ministry to indicate the thrust of his mission: "The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor" (Lk 4,18). Jesus has to bear the consequences: the poor are no reliable basis for success. They have no political clout, they depend on

the stronger sections of society and, in time of insecurity, follow their lead. Once the tide of public opinion turns against Jesus, he finds no support among them. Jesus belongs to the poor, suffers with the poor, is powerless like the poor.

In Jewish society leprosy was the dreaded disease which not only destroys the body but separates its victims from their family and village and marks them with the stigma of untouchability. Anyone who came in contact with them risked the same ostracism. Repeatedly the gospels tell us about Jesus' concern with these outcasts. Mark gives us the account of Jesus' first contact with lepers and its consequences for him. Jesus had felt sorry for the man, touched him and healed him, and had told him to be silent. But in his enthusiasm the healed man spread the story all around. As a consequence Jesus "could go no longer openly into any town but had to stay outside where nobody lived" (Mk 1, 40-45). This is saving love: not only to do good but to share in the discrimination of the suffering.

More farreaching in its consequences is Jesus' association with sinners who were shunned by selfrespecting society. Jesus' attitude is more than forgiving kindness, he stands for them in saving solidarity. In the parable of the barren figtree, which ought to be cut down because it did not bear fruit, Jesus (under the disguise of the vinedresser) takes up for the condemned tree: leave it one more year!" (Lk 13,6-9). Jesus stands on our side even before his Father. His entire life is to be with us and for us. He is radically opposed to sin, but sin is not overcome by condemnation. A condemning verdict actually preserves and confirms sin. It is likely to lock the sinner more stubbornly in his solitary confinement. The only key to open the door is love. Love resolves the isolation. So we see Jesus accepting the sinful woman (Lk 7,36-58); he protects the woman accused for adultery (Jn 8,3-11). He allows himself to be invited by taxcollectors who were hated for their collaboration with the Roman occupation force. Jesus has to pay for it: he risks his reputation: "If this were a prophet he would know who this woman is" (Lk 7,39). He is forced to stand even against the Thora: "Moses has ordered us in the law to condemn women like this" (Jn 8,4). He is marked as an outsider: "He welcomes

sinner and eats with them" (Lk 15,2). Jesus' answer consists in the three parables of the lost sheep, the lost coin and the lost son (Lk 15), each ending in rejoicing: "There is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents". "Your brother was dead and has come to life, was lost and is found".

Jesus saves us by becoming one of us. The final scene of the crucifixion is the immortal memory of his saving association with us sinners. The judges had to impress it on the imagination of the people that Jesus was truly a criminal. It could not be shown better than by crucifying him between two bandits: "They crucified him and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left (Lk 23,13)." He was despised and rejected by men... He has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows... He was wounded for our transgressions" (Is 53).

The saving mission of the Church

Jesus' mission becomes the mission of the Church. It is a mission of love, of God's own love as it is unfolded in Jesus' life.

Often enough love is personal enrichment through sharing and mutual support. We can grow only in communication. But it is of the very essence of love that it is centred on the other person, his growth, happiness and fulfilment. When love turns back on itself and its own satisfaction it becomes disguised selfishness.

Christian love has its norm and model in Jesus: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 13,34). His love was fully turned to us — in him God's love has been revealed. Jesus' love turns to those who are without love.. "Love asks for nothing in return but seeks those who need it. And who needs our love more than those who are consumed with hatred and are utterly devoid of love? Who, in other words, deserves our love more than our enemy? Where is love more glorified than when it dwells in the midst of enemies?" (D. Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*. St. Paul Publication 1974, p. 133). This is the pattern to be recognized and followed by the Church in the fulfilment of her mission.

We may have conceived the mission of the Church too much in terms of functions. We ask what are we doing?

what are our plans? The questions are important, yet in Jesus' mission and work they were secondary. He was with us to share his life — the Church has to do the same. The Council has recognized again the primacy of loving presence before all missionary activity. After the example of Jesus "the Church through its children joins itself with the people of every condition, but especially with the poor and afflicted, and willingly spends herself for them. It shares their joys and sorrows, it is familiar with their hopes and problems of life, it suffers with them in the anguish of death" (Mission Decree n. 12). The Church is seen not as the victorious expansion over new areas but as the embodiment of Jesus' own serving presence in our midst: He fulfilled his redemptive mission "in poverty and oppression", and the Church is called "to follow the same path. . . . She is not set up to seek earthly glory but to proclaim, and this through her own example, humility and selfdenial. Christ was sent by the Father to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart, to seek and save what was lost. Similarly the Church encompasses with her love all those who are afflicted by human misery" (Constitution of the Church n. 8). From this presence flows the active involvement: "She recognizes in those who are poor and suffer the image of her poor and suffering founder. She does all in her power to relieve their need, and in them she strives to serve Christ" (ibid). The Church belongs to the sinful world. She cannot claim Jesus' sinlessness for herself but "clasping sinners to her bosom, at once holy and always in need of purification, she follows constantly the path of penance and renewal" (ibid).

For the retreatant this third week of the Spiritual Exercises should become an occasion seriously to examine his/her involvement and solidarity with the world in the concrete surroundings of life and profession. Surely we must be concerned with the efficient performance of our duties; this is our contribution to the world in which we live. It is, however, more important to be person-oriented, to think of the people with and for whom we are living and working, of their needs, their growth, their fulfilment. This was the concern of Jesus. In the Creed we confess that he came to us "for us men, and for our salvation".

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *"He was silent and made no answer"* (Mk 14,61).

Go through the passion accounts and see Jesus in silent solidarity with our human family.

- "Put the sword back into its place": (Mt 26,52). Jesus had been struggling all his life against evil and injustice. He is not passively resigned to the domination of evil powers. But the hour has come where human resistance is meaningless. He leaves his life and his mission in his Father's hands. He joins the helpless, the unjustly condemned, the victims of violence and cruelty.
- "He was silent": (Mk 14,61). Jesus had spoken fearlessly for the poor and despised, against the powerful and selfrighteous. Now he shares the fate of the voiceless. The total selfgift to his Father, his solidarity with the silent and suffering, should not be desecrated by noisy arguments. He is silent before God, silent before the world. He leaves the last word to God.
- "Father forgive them": (Lk 23,34). Jesus had been engaged in a relentless struggle against evil, but never against people. His heart was never poisoned by hatred or revenge. When Jerusalem rejects him he does not curse his adversaries but he weeps over the city. His only answer to cruelty and calumny is the prayer of forgiveness. His enemies are closest to his heart.

2. *The Compassionate High Priest.*

Take up once more the texts of the epistle to the Hebrews of Jesus' solidarity with us: Hebr 2,14-18; 4,14-16; 5,7-10; 12,1-2 (cf. p. 110).

Jesus is with us:

- sharing in our sufferings
- struggling with our temptations
- praying from the depth of our agonies

- learning with us the obedience unto death.
- So he becomes the true High Priest bringing us God's love and life
- taking us with him to his Father: "I come to fulfil your will, O God" (Hebr 10,7).

3. *Giving and Losing* (Mt. 5, 13-16).

The disciples have to continue Jesus' mission. He describes their mission under three symbols:

- "You are the salt of the earth": Salt is meant not to be preserved but to be used. In its use it is dissolved, loses itself, and so it gives taste. Losing is pain, giving is joy. Such is Jesus' selfgift, such is the life of his disciples.
- "You are the light of the world": Light must shine; it is not meant to be put under the bushel. Its very being is to radiate, giving itself up, giving brightness to the world. This is Jesus' mission, to be with us and for us, to be the light of the world. He entrusts the same mission to his disciples.
- "A city on a hill cannot be hid": A city is meant with open and inviting doors to offer shelter and home. It does not exist for its own sake, it receives wanderers, welcomes the homeless. So is Jesus, so is his Church.
- The last symbol in which Jesus expresses his selfgift is bread. Bread is meant to be eaten, to become life and strength in us: "Take and eat". Jesus' disciples break the bread in the Eucharist, become Christ's body, must also be broken, must become bread to give life to the world.

QUESTIONS

1. How do I see the Church's mission — my own mission? A work to be done, a target to be reached, or the communion with the people, concern, involvement with people, creating a community of trust and love?

2. Am I ready in solidarity with the people to take personal risks, giving up comfort, social prominence, positions of influence?

FOR REFLECTION:

"If you do good, you must not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, you must be quite unconscious of it. Otherwise you are simply displaying your own virtue and not that which has its source in Jesus Christ... The genuine work of love is always hidden work. Take heed therefore that you know it not, for only so it is the goodness of God. If we want to know our own goodness or love, it has already ceased to be love. We must be unaware even of our love for our enemies". (D. Bonhoeffer, *l.c.* 143).

Chapter Four

THE CROSS

"I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Cor 2, 2).

It is impossible to philosophize on the cross, to comprehend it, or to "make sense" of it. On Good Friday we read the passion, we pour out our needs, the needs of the whole world before God, and then we adore, we kneel before the cross, we adore God. Nowhere is God closer to us than in the cross of Jesus, nowhere he seems so far away, so totally beyond our understanding as at Golgotha. This is Jesus' hour where all he is, all that God has to tell us in him, is summed up. Jesus no longer teaches. He forgives and he prays, till his voice dies. He too becomes silent before the cross.

Jesus reveals the Father

Who is God? No one has ever seen him. Still, God has revealed himself to us. He did so first in creation which is spread out before us as a gigantic exhibition of greatness, wisdom, power, of rich diversity woven together into harmony where all conflicts, all struggle for survival are blended together and redeemed in a mysterious order of growth. In the created world God has offered us not only "a constant evidence of himself" so that we could be aware of his divine mystery, but also his concern for us "opening up to us a way of heavenly salvation" (Vatican II D.V. n. 3). No one has realized this more deeply than Jesus, for whom the world and human life

were like mirrors in which he recognized his Father with his love and concern. Jesus never ceases to propose it to us in his parables.

But Jesus knows more about God than what is reflected in nature. He prayed to him with unique intimacy, 'called him "Abba, dear Father," which was unheard of in Jewish religious tradition. God had come infinitely close to us in Jesus who could speak about him in ways no one had ever spoken to the poor and exhausted people. No hair would fall from their head without their Father's knowing. When they felt lost and abandoned, he would set out in search for them and bring them back. Truly, no one knew the Father as Jesus did. No one could convey the message of his love as Jesus did and in a language which touched the depth of their hearts. Jesus' coming was truly like a wedding feast. Jesus himself used this parable. At a wedding feast people are allowed to forget the drudgery of their daily toil, when they laugh and dance in an abundance of joy and music. This feast is not reserved for a privileged class but all are welcome to it, the poor and crippled, the blind and lame (cf Lk 14,21). In Jesus' presence all social distinctions and political labels are brushed aside, all find their God-given dignity. It is the only true human dignity we can ever find, with him, as God's beloved children.

This is Jesus' message of God. It is as new and redeeming today as in his time, the message of God's love and concern, deeper, richer, more faithful than any human love. We are somehow able to grasp this message and to express it in human language. But it is not yet the last word about God. *God speaks his last word through Jesus in his death on the cross.* We must follow Jesus into this ultimate mystery which is beyond human understanding, where there is only faith and love.

The mystery of God

From ancient times people have sensed this unspeakable mystery. They left the first fruits, which they needed most urgently, on the trees; these belonged to God. They burnt animals on altars, allowing them to go up in fire and smoke to the unknown. Does this make sense? Is it mere superstition, magic? Or is this mankind's dim awareness of the ultimate

mystery of God which eludes human understanding and practical usefulness? God is greater than our mind, greater than our world, greater than our heart.

The cross is Jesus' ultimate encounter with the mystery of God. His entire life is going to God, a pilgrimage towards the unknown, not in fear and anxiety, but in love. "A body you have given to me, behold I come." Jesus sees his body, his actual human existence, moving towards that ultimate destiny, stage by stage, until he reaches that last barrier where God is hidden and all understanding comes to an end. He enters into the darkness of the passion, the "hour of darkness", which becomes ever denser as the end approaches so that the evangelists have no better way of expressing it than that "darkness was over the whole land" when the sun stopped shining (cf Mk 15,33). Whatever Jesus knew about his Father seems lost; his last prayer is Psalm 22: "God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15,34).

Who is God? It seems, the more Jesus advances in his life and work, which is meant to be God's revelation to us, the more God is hidden. Jesus himself seems abandoned by his Father. Yet, Jesus is *with us*. He suffers *our* agony. He dies *our* death *for us*. This is God's final revelation: "Greater love has no man than this that a man lays down his life for his friends" (Jn 15,13). God is love! It remains true that God cannot be seen, and in Jesus' death it is awfully true. Who can discover God in this confluence of hatred, cruelty, blasphemy, falsehood and violence? Do not try to see him; but sense the closeness of Jesus, who became our brother to be with us in this world of darkness and death. This is love; and where there is love, there is God. God is no longer the elusive object of contemplation. He no longer speaks in words and deeds which can be analysed by human reason. He is here at Calvary on the cross with his very being. And I am in him, if I have love. Teresa of the Child Jesus at the end of her short life lived through agonies not only of body and mind, but of heart. She felt totally abandoned and doubts came to her so that she knew no longer whether she still believed in God. Only love remained: "I know nothing," she said, "I only know that I love." This is the end of her little way, to go on and on in God's love, until everything disappears,

until all assurances and securities break down. Only love remains. Love is beyond all human wisdom (cf 1 Cor 13).

We are saved through Jesus' Cross

The cross is the end of Jesus' life and mission. On Golgotha God speaks his final word to us, the word of salvation through Jesus crucified. For ever the cross will remain the centre of the Christian community. It is our hope and salvation. How are we saved through Jesus' cross?

Scripture speaks in many ways about our salvation, which comes to us through Jesus' death. In the key text of his letter to the Romans, Paul tells us that we are justified and live our true life before God not from the observation of the law but from God's grace, "as a gift through redemption, which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood to be received in faith" (Rom 3,24f). It is God's own work who "delivered us from the dominion of darkness and transferred us to the kingdom of his beloved Son, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col 1,13). This redemption is through Jesus' blood (cf Eph 1,7).

What is salvation? It is the renewal of human wholeness, the fulfilment of our destiny as God sees us from the beginning, as he wants us to become. God himself is love, eternal love. He made man according to his image and likeness. Man is truly himself only when he loves, in the true and full sense of love, as God himself loves, as God has revealed his love in Jesus his Son. As *Jesus loves*: He loves his Father with unbroken loyalty, in face of temptation, in intimate union, in confidence and obedience to the end, on days of joy and strength and in the darkness of the passion, where his Father seems infinitely distant. Jesus loves us, his brothers and sisters, with a love that cannot be extinguished by betrayal and hatred, by insult and cruelty. Never can the light of his love be devoured by the powers of darkness. Jesus loves to the end and gives himself to us, that we should live in and through him. This is Jesus, as God saw him: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased". This, at last, is man, as he is meant to be. Man can be truly himself only in love,

when he loves God, when he loves his neighbour, unconditionally.

But in Jesus God tells us also how hard it is truly to love. How easily we misuse this word "love" to stand for superficial feelings, and often this word is a cover for selfish passion. *Love of God* leads beyond all limits of creation, in which God's wisdom and power have been revealed, into the mystery of God himself where reasoning ceases, where there is only silent adoration and surrender. *Love of neighbour*—all neighbours, including strangers and enemies, is entirely different from the spontaneous flow of affection by which human lives are woven together. It has its source in God and flows like a spring from his unfathomable depth into our world. It can never be embittered, because its origin is God himself. It can never be disappointed by the weakness and cowardice it encounters in our world. It can never be dried up in the desert of our loveless society. It can never be poisoned by human meanness and cruelty.

This love is our salvation. God gives us Jesus that we should have life. But how can Jesus' love save *me*, change *my* life, liberate me from the prison of selfish narrowness? His love puts me to shame; but how can it save me? I am incapable of such love. It is beyond my powers, beyond my boldest dreams ever to reach to such heights.

True, such love, such total freedom is beyond my reach. Still it is my only salvation, not as my achievement but "as God's grace, as a gift". God gives it to me in Jesus his Son, and I must "receive it in faith". God sees me, sees all people, in Jesus his Son and through him draws us to himself into the mystery of his love. If I cling to Jesus in true faith and invite him to enter into my life, I shall grow and be transformed by him. I shall receive the impact of his power by looking at him in meditation: "They shall look at him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19,37). I shall also receive him in the sacrament of his love, eat the bread, his broken body, and drink the cup, the blood that was poured out for me. If I do it in faith and love he will transform me. I shall find his life and love in the community of his believers. *If we are together in a fellowship of faith and love, the mystery of God's love will become real in our world and we shall experience his saving power.*

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus' saving death* (Lk 23, 26-49).

Each of the passion narratives has its own perspective. Each should be read and meditated upon within its own context. Here we choose Luke's narration, in which the passion is narrated as the last manifestation of Jesus' saving love.

- "They seized Simon of Cyrene...and laid on him the cross": Mark identifies Simon by mentioning that he was the father of Alexander and Rufus, who obviously were Christians well known to his readers. Thus it appears that Simon's family became Christian. Though unwillingly drawn into Jesus' passion Simon must have felt the impact of Jesus' person.
- "Do not weep for me but for yourselves and for your children": Jesus speaks to the women who lament over him. He is compassionately concerned more about Jerusalem, its impending disaster, than for himself.
- "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they do": this is Jesus' prayer for forgiveness in the midst of hatred, mockery and brutal cruelty. This prayer will be repeated throughout the centuries by his Spirit-filled disciples (cf Stephen's prayer, Acts 7,60).
- "He saved others, let him save himself, if he is the Christ of God": this mockery expresses the deep truth that Jesus is Saviour for us. Jesus' love is concerned with others, not with himself.
- "This is the king of the Jews": this sacrilegious parody too contains the deep truth that Jesus' kingly power is based only on love, that in being defeated he begins to reign.
- "Today you will be with me in paradise": this is Jesus' last consolation, not to receive relief but to give the assurance of salvation to a lost man.
- "There was darkness over the world...and the curtain of the temple was torn into two": the hour

of darkness opens out our final access to God. Through Jesus' total surrender to God in death the separation of man from God is overcome.

- "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit": this is Jesus' last prayer according to Luke. This is salvation: that our life finds its shelter in God beyond darkness and death.
- "The Centurion praised God and said, Certainly this man was innocent": the powers of darkness have had their way. Now the tide turns; there is an atmosphere of peace on Golgotha after Jesus' death. The Centurion is the first to be touched by it.

2. *People in Jesus' passion*

Powers of darkness and powers of grace are at work in Jesus' passion. They are embodied in the people whom we encounter in the passion accounts. To understand more explicitly the struggle between light and darkness in our own life and in the world it is helpful to look at the persons in Jesus' passion.

The struggle between light and darkness goes on in history with ever new faces and names. We too are involved in this struggle. In the characters of the passion-account we see some of these powers at work.

Jesus' enemies:

- *Judas*, the frustrated disciple, whose hopes were not fulfilled. He was called. Has he ever opened himself to this call without reserve? Why did he die in despair?
- The *judges* and the *witnesses* who speak against Jesus. They have convinced themselves that they are acting in God's name, to protect the sacred traditions of the nation.
- The *soldiers* who abandon themselves to cruel instincts.
- *Pilate*, the politician, who is caught in the nets of blackmail:
- *Herod*, who does not care for justice but wants to see a wonderworker.

- *the blind mass of the people* with no convictions, swayed by hatred.

The wavering

- *Peter* has to learn how little he can rely on his strength.
- the tired, discouraged *disciples*, who still have to find a faith which cannot be broken by power.
- The silent majority of the *people* who love Jesus but are not prepared to take risks.

The faithful believers

- *Mary of Bethany*, from whom Jesus accepts a last sign of devotion when she anoints him.
- *Simon*, who carries Jesus' cross.
- *Mary of Magdala* who follows Jesus even to Golgotha.
- The *thief* who dies at Jesus' side.
- The *Roman captain* who finds faith on Golgotha (cf Mk 15,39).
- *Mary*, Jesus' mother.

QUESTIONS:

1. There are many ways of meditating on Jesus' passion, mainly two: 1) To learn from Jesus to go into darkness and to face trials and pain, 2) the sharing in Jesus' passion today, in the continued struggle between light and darkness in our world and Church. Have I learned these ways of meditating?
2. Jesus has suffered because he struggled against the unjust suffering of the oppressed and rejected. Am I ready to stand against injustice when it implies risks?

FOR REFLECTION

"O Lord, my eyes look into your dying countenance and my soul kisses the bleeding wounds. O Lord, there are people who put their trust in the innocence of their life, others in the practice of austerity, one in this, one in that. But all my confidence rests in your suffering, Lord, in your satisfaction and merit".

HENRY SUSO

THE SILENT DAY

"On the Sabbath they rested as the Law commanded"
(Lk 23,56)

This is the day of silence. In Jerusalem it is the great Sabbath when all are in their homes. The faithful few had hurried Jesus' funeral so as not to interfere with the beginning of the Sabbath when the sun set. The battle is over, Jesus' enemies have achieved their goal. Jesus' disciples are in hiding. All is quiet. This is the end of Jesus' life and the beginning of his real life. But there is a day of rest in between.

It is a day of silence also in the Liturgy with no celebration; only the office is said. It is the suspension like a bridge, between Good Friday and Easter.

It should be a day of silence also in the retreat. No new theme should be introduced to distract the attention from what is central. This great mystery must sink in, the mystery of Jesus' passion and love. Jesus' blood has been shed, the tomb is closed and sealed. What does it all mean in Jesus' own life? in my life? in the life of our world?

We need this rest. God gave the commandment: "Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labour and do all your work, but the seventh day is a sabbath to the Lord your God; in it you shall do no work... The Lord blessed the sabbath day and hallowed it" (Ex 20, 8-11). The entire retreat is a time of silence, but this day

should be kept free even from all exterior exercises. The day is meant to be spent in prayer, contemplation, adoration.

Each one may find his/her own way of entering more deeply into Jesus' passion. On the following pages a few possible approaches are given.

1. The mystery of the passion as it was realized by Paul

For Paul the paschal mystery became the source and centre of his life and mission. His experiences, spread all through his letters, are expressed with great force in some of the great texts. We may take the bible and allow these texts to sink into our mind and heart.

Jesus' self-gift and exaltation (Phil 2,6-11).

In the words of this ancient hymn, which is quoted by Paul, I see the descent of God's love into our world: *Jesus empties himself*, discards glory and power and fulfils his mission not in the form of domination but of service, *becoming obedient unto death on the cross*. This self-emptying is his greatness; it is the only title of his exaltation. Because he allowed his name to be trodden down, he was given a name above all other names. Because he discarded power, he is Lord, and all knees bend before him.

The Paschal Mystery must be realized in the Christian life (Rom 6,1-14).

Every Christian life is patterned after Jesus Christ. The contemplation of Jesus' passion is not the remembrance of past events but the realization of what is taking place today in our own life. We cannot gather the fruit of Jesus' death and enjoy sinful self-indulgence, "continue in sin so that grace may abound" (v. 1). Through baptism we share in Jesus' life, death and resurrection. His death must be realized in our life, so that we be allowed to share in his glory: "We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the sinful body might be destroyed and we might no longer be enslaved to sin" (v. 6). This is our hope that "if we have died with Christ, we believe that we shall also live with him" (v. 8).

"Let not sin reign in your mortal bodies to make you obey their passions...but yield yourselves to God as men who have been brought from death to life" (v. 12f).

Jesus' death and resurrection in the apostolate

(2 Cor 4,7-14).

This is Paul's personal experience in his work. The fruit of his apostolate does not come from his own power but it is God's gift. He carries the treasure of Christ's mission "in earthen vessels to show that the transcendent power belongs to God and not to us" (v. 7). In his persecutions and trials he is "always carrying in the body the death of Jesus" but also the power of the resurrection so that also "the life of Jesus may be manifested in our mortal flesh" (v. 10). For Paul the apostolate is the continuation of the paschal mystery in the Church, the self-gift of the apostle that bears fruit in the community, "so death is at work in me but life in you" (v. 12).

The cross is folly for man, but wisdom of God

(1 Cor 1,17-2,5).

Once more Paul shares his experience. The Corinthians had been impressed by eloquent language and philosophical wisdom as it was taught in Greece. God, however, has chosen to speak not in human wisdom but in the human life and death of Jesus' person. The message of Jesus is shared "not in plausible words of wisdom but in demonstration of the spirit of power" (2,4). But those, who open themselves to God's word in faith will find true wisdom, the "secret hidden wisdom of God, which God decreed before the ages for our glorification" (2,7).

Jesus' redemptive passion is continued in the Church

(Col 1,24).

At times we look at Jesus' saving death like a treasure, a deposit, from which the Church through the ages can draw grace and strength. True, it remains for ever the lifespring of the Christian community, but it must be renewed in the believers. Jesus' parable of the grain of wheat that must die

in order to bring forth fruit remains true also in the Church. Jesus has fulfilled his own suffering; what is missing still is the participation in his death and resurrection by his followers. "I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, that is, the Church."

2. Meeting and interviewing those who were involved in Jesus' passion.

This is a play of fantasy which obviously does not claim historical accuracy but may help us in a living way to enter into the complexity of Jesus' passion and its ultimate meaning. Such faith fantasies have a truth of their own. Also in works of literature, in dramas or novels, the dialogues never took place in reality, still sometimes they give more insights into characters and motivations than mere factual accounts. In our meditations such fantasies can be an effective means to keep our mind and imagination centred on the topic of reflection.

Meeting Caiaphas: You have achieved your goal and are rid of the disturbing movement round Jesus. Are you so sure? Why did you ask Pilate to send a guard of soldiers to watch the tomb? (Mt 27, 62-66). Do you really believe that you are now in control of the situation? that Jesus' message and mission have come to an end? You surely have learned to handle critical situations firmly, without inhibitions of your conscience, and to carry public opinion with you. But was this merely another "critical situation"? You are the High Priest and have acted as God's representative for his people. Are *you* Lord of the people—or Yahweh! You should have seen more in Jesus than a "disturbance" of your political games. As High Priest you should have been alert to God's speaking. Priests are meant to represent God—it is terrible if they try to replace him.

Meeting Pilate: Your name has been blackened! You have come even into our creed as the one who was legally responsible for Jesus' death. It is true, in a way, but the really responsible people are among the Jews. Who would not see your dilemma? You had your obvious problem with Rome,

the malignant blackmail of the Jews could do you much harm. Whatever the historical details in your trial of Jesus, through those accounts I still feel that you realized something of his greatness. Some even thought you were a Christian at heart (Tertullian). We read of the warning sent to you by your wife during the trial. She had suffered much in her dreams on account of Jesus (Mt 27,19), and in the end you washed your hands: "I am innocent of this righteous man's blood: see to it yourselves" (Mt 27,24). Why should we single you out to condemn you? Your struggle, your failure have been repeated a thousand times through the history of the Church. We are all sinners. Jesus had to die.

Meeting Judas: You have been called the most enigmatic figure in the New Testament, and you have become more and more a symbol of all malice. In John's gospel you are even called a devil (6,70). But I know that you have been loved and trusted by Jesus. You were a noble character. I shall never believe that you betrayed Jesus merely for the sake of some money. You yourself were ashamed of it and wanted to get rid of it. You were gifted and had high connections. You had great hopes. All your expectations for a better world, for a true national renewal, you invested in Jesus. Some people even think that you gave him away to his enemies only to force him at last to come out with firm and powerful leadership to change the distasteful situation of the nation. And when your calculations proved wrong, you fell into despair. But whatever really was in your mind? Why did you not surrender your hopes and dreams to Jesus? Could you not trust *him*? You felt you were more clever and saw things more clearly than the others who were hardly aware of that impossible situation. You saw it and took a decisive action; and then you realized you were terribly wrong. But could you not even after your deed turn to Jesus? You knew that he loved you and never would have rejected you. One last question: *Judas, have you ever really loved?* You died in despair. But I still believe that God kept you in his love. God is greater than your sins, my sins, all peoples' sins!

Meeting Peter: Your story has been told extensively in the gospels, almost too much for me. How many sermons have

been preached on your denial of Jesus! I find it so easy to understand. You were fully part of the small group round Jesus and felt safe and sheltered in it. You even were their spokesman. You realized, of course, something of the difficulties and of the growing hostility against Jesus, but this did not affect that inner security which you felt in Jesus' presence. This was his unique power, to awaken confidence and to give assurance. You simply could not imagine what would happen once you were away from his assuring presence, left to yourself. So you made those bold statements of being ready to go to jail and even to death with Jesus. Who could blame you? But it was all so different in the court of the High Priest. All were there, the detachment of police that had brought Jesus from Gethsemane, the servants, the servant girls, all talked about Jesus and laughed about him. They had set out in strength to capture him, but there was no real resistance. They had brought him in easily. It was ridiculous! Now Jesus was questioned by the authorities; what incredible charges were brought against him! And those followers of him, stupid people from the North. How they had been fooled! They all ran away—but, wait! Here is one of them. All of a sudden one of the girls made a scene: "Of course you were among them." There was no way out. A whole crowd all at once came round: "You can't deny the way you talk. You are from Galilee..." And so it happened. How you felt it when Jesus came out and looked at you; and then you broke down. You never tried to explain or to excuse yourself. You simply owned up to it. You were terribly honest. Not many are. But I must tell you that I understand you so well. We are so dependent on the people around us, we just cannot stand alone. We need support and company. We need the Church so much; today more than ever. How many of us can stand alone in the midst of all our ideologies and mass media? We need people with whom we can share our faith. Jesus prayed for you, Peter, in particular, that you should *strengthen your brethren*.

Such fantasies can easily be multiplied, but they should never become a mere play of imagination. They are a means to get into inner touch with the wealth and depth of the gospel, a way of digging for the hidden treasure.

3. Holy Saturday with Mary, his Mother

This is another fantasy, a visit to Mary in the silence of that great sabbath day, when all the experiences of her life came back to her. In her life, as in a mirror, Jesus' life, mission, passion and death are reflected.

- Would you tell me, how it all began?
- The angel told me that I would be his mother. I began to feel his presence. My whole life, my body, my mind, my whole being began to be centred on him. I can think of nothing greater than to be his mother, to feel him grow in my womb. All God's promises would be fulfilled in him, and he would be my child.
- The angel told me to call his name *Jesus*, Saviour. He was my child but he had a mission, his own destiny. He would not belong to me. From the very beginning I had to accept that he belonged to the people, to the world.
- He would be called Son of the Most High. God would be his Father. It filled me with awe. But I had to learn that all his loyalty would belong to God alone.
- I did consent to be his mother, as the Lord's hand-maid. God's love and power had taken hold of my life, it was no longer mine but it belonged to God. Yes, I gave my word, but it took me a whole life to realize its full meaning. Yesterday, under the cross, I spoke the same words, but I felt their full weight: *Be it done to me according to your Word.*
- In Bethlehem the angels sang of God's glory, and of peace among men. It was beautiful, and yet so different from what people expected. We were so terribly poor and helpless. More and more I began to ponder about all this in my heart; nobody guided me, but as life went on I began to see it better.
- I took him to the temple. Old Simeon held him in his arms: A light to the Gentiles and the glory to the people of Israel—but also a sign of contradiction,

and a sword through my own heart. Slowly I began to understand it.

- Nazareth was peaceful, till he was twelve. But this was too much! How anxious Joseph and I were till we found him in the temple, in the house of his Father, as he called it. This was his real home, but I could not understand it. It was meant, I guess, as a preparation for later years.
- He left Nazareth and joined that movement of John at the Jordan. It was hard; I was alone. I felt he would not come back. He had his mission, no one could stop him.
- Some of our people felt that he was out of his mind and wanted to bring him back; it was useless. I also wanted at least to see him, but he was fully in his mission. Those who hear God's word were his new family.
- I watched him from a distance. He had some truly glorious days. But I felt the growing tension, the cold isolation. How lonely he must have been!
- I heard how finally they got hold of him and condemned him; all people talked about it. I had to be with him in this hour.
- I stood under his cross, alone with the disciple whom he loved, in the midst of an ocean of hatred and cruelty. The crowd pointed at me; they were curious about his mother. It was all pain and shame.
- He entrusted me to his disciple to give me a home. It was not only to have a place to stay, it was my final place, with his disciples.
- I held him when they took him down, and cleansed the wounds of his broken body. We wrapped him in linen. It was all in a hurry on account of the feast. And I was very tired.
- Now he lies in the tomb. No one can understand it: My Son, God's Son. He gave his life into his Father's hands.

QUESTIONS:

1. Our life has hours of action, hours of celebration. Our life needs also hours of silence and reflection on the divine mysteries and on my own life and experience. Do I love silence? Can I fill it with God's presence?
2. Have I learnt to see my life in the mirror of Jesus' life, of the paschal mystery?

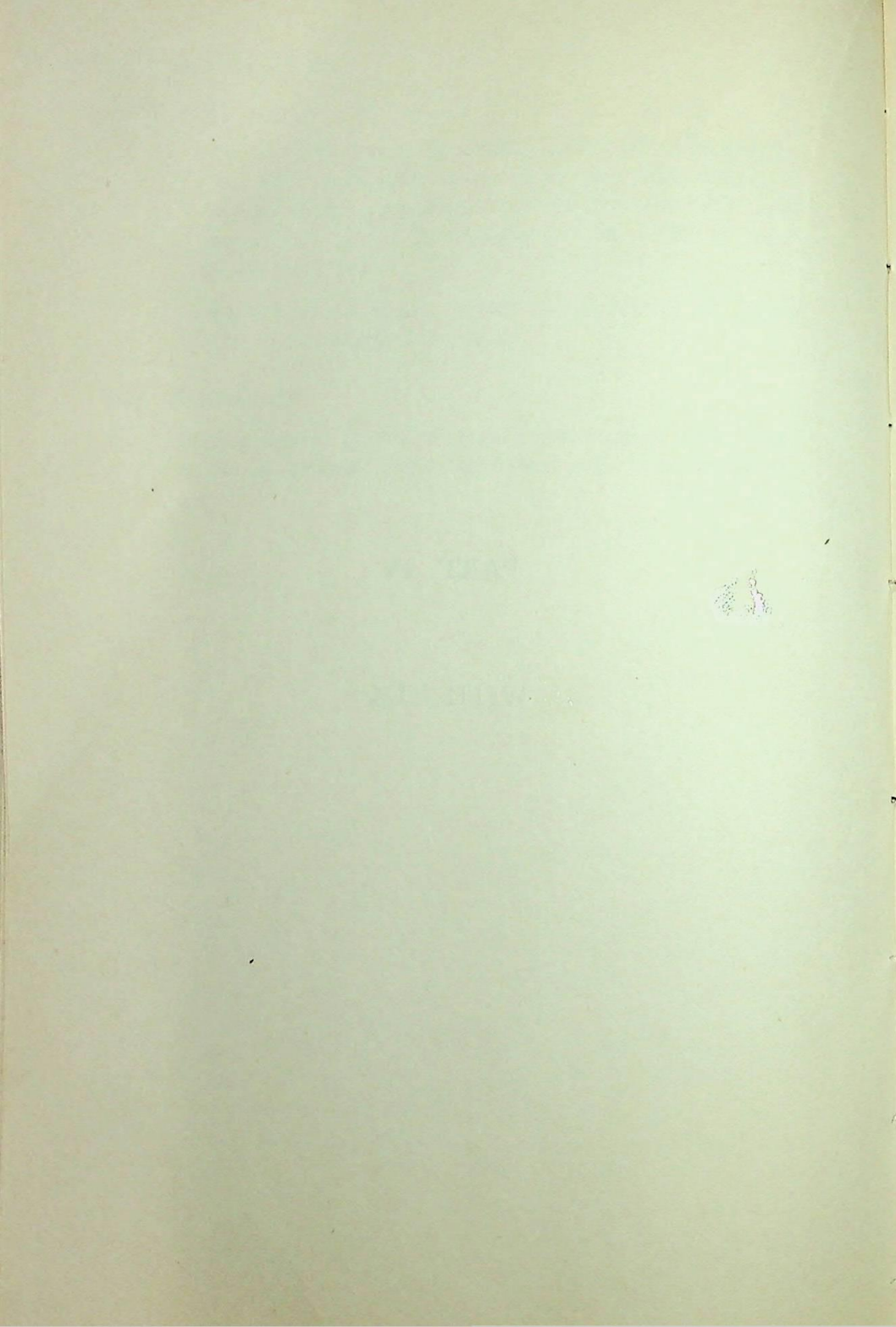
FOR REFLECTION:

"Nothing is more painful than suffering, nothing more joyful than having suffered. Suffering is short pain, and long love".

HENRY SUSO

PART IV

WITH HIM



EASTER

"He is risen, he is not here" (Mk 16,6).

The Final Revelation

Easter is not a continuation of Jesus' earthly life, a new chapter, which would lead his mission and work to a "happy end." His earthly life ended on Golgotha. Much less is it something entirely new, different from his life and mission in the villages of Galilee and his conflict with the leaders of the people. There is not nor should there seem to be, some sort of gulf between Jesus' preaching and working in his earthly life and the proclamation of the Christian message in the early communities, or between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith and worship in the Church. Any such separation would destroy the oneness and comprehensiveness of God's revelation in Jesus his Son.

Nor should we understand Easter merely as a subsequent approval of Jesus' claims, of his mission and message. In his entire life Jesus stands on his own authority, with no legitimation from outside, neither academic qualifications nor any sanction from the religious authorities of the Jews. His authority lies in the authenticity of his life and preaching. From the beginning the people realized the difference between Jesus and the teachers of the law, who relied on traditions and the authority of others. Jesus taught with his own authority, with an inner clarity and genuineness which can never be proved. Nor do they need a proof. Jesus' ministry is an

ongoing self-revelation in which his mission, God's revelation in him, becomes more and more articulate, becomes more and more perceptible and meaningful for the people who open their minds and hearts to it. But it always remains a dialogue, a self-communication of God to us, which demands human response and acceptance. Every person is, indeed, able to withdraw, to close himself into his own world, to become an "objective observer" of Jesus' doing and speaking. Anyone may become Christ's enemy if he feels himself threatened by Jesus' message.

Thus also Jesus' miracles are not really meant as "proofs" for his teaching. They are not attached to his teaching as an exterior support, as if a miraculous action could substantiate the intrinsic truth of his message. His miracles are *signs*; they are a different way of speaking. Through them it has to become clear and tangibly perceptible that God's reign had truly come. Jesus' message was not an empty promise, a deceptive dream, which would soon vanish in the stark daylight of actual reality. Jesus heals and casts out demons; he utterly silences the powers of destruction. The new creation is in the making. However, these signs, just like Jesus' words, must be understood and accepted with open hearts. Even these powerful signs can be rejected, argued against and ridiculed. So they have been by Jesus' adversaries.

Thus Easter is not simply an argument that was subsequently added to Jesus' life and mission to substantiate the truth of his teaching and the divine origin of his mission. Rather, the Easter Event is the full and final revelation of Jesus, of what he really is, of what his message of God's reign means. Once more the disciples encounter Jesus, but his life is no longer subject to the plots and the violence of his enemies. His mission has broken through the narrow limits of the Palestinian world. God has raised him and begins to show him to us in a new and definite way, as he himself has seen his Son from the beginning, the beloved Son in whom he is well pleased. The Apostles, and all believers, learn to see Jesus in the light to Easter.

The Easter Faith

Easter is not a continuation of Jesus' earthly life, but

everything the disciples had experienced when they were with him now appears in a new light. They "recognize" him, he is the same Jesus who had died. In their own way the Evangelists express this recognition when they narrate how Jesus showed them his wounds or ate with them. But now he is taken into the life and light of God.

Thus new light falls on their experiences of the past: they had been drawn to his person and had become his disciples; they had listened and learned; often they had failed to understand and yet they had perceived something of the depth of his words. Now, on Easter, they know that Jesus has words of eternal life. All that they had seen and heard and had stored in the recesses of their memory is now awakened. It is not merely remembered but seen in a new way, in its full meaning, as we often see the significance of early events of childhood only in a mature age. All seems to fall into place. Truly, Jesus has been sent by his Father to proclaim God's kingdom; it had been embodied in his person and lived out in his life; it had already begun to take shape in their small community. All this now comes to life in the Easter experience which Luke sums up: "He presented himself alive after the passion by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking of the kingdom of God" (Acts 1,3).

Our Easter

What Jesus gave to his disciples, the true and final understanding of his life and mission, the awareness of their own vocation, their community, their task, he gives to all his followers: Jesus came for all. We too must understand his life and message, must make his mission our own and proclaim God's reign in our world. How can we do it unless he gives us the light of Easter? We too—more than ever today—need the assurance of God's care and love and the promise of final fulfilment. The light of Easter guides us on our way through our world towards the fulfilment of our mission.

This, then, is the fourth week of the Spiritual Exercises. It is the school of living in the light of the Risen Lord, in the light of faith. It is the life every Christian has to live, in the midst of situations often painful and disturbing, which defy

explanations. Faith is more than the intellectual assent to revealed truth. It is a new life with a new awareness: God is present in our midst in a way that cannot be observed like the various happenings in our surroundings. Faith gives a new dimension to all our experiences. It cannot be demonstrated by means of scientific methods and yet it is more real than what the eye sees and reason explains. What did Moses experience in that great hour of his life which the bible describes in the scene of the burning bush? He would find it difficult to prove that it was more than imagination, that he really had encountered God. Still, he knows that God has spoken, his life has been changed, Israel's history has begun. God is with him in his mission, and he has the courage to face the impossible task. His entire life is proof that God was with him.

So it is with the disciples after Easter. They live in faith. God had been with Jesus during his earthly life. They had sensed his hidden presence, now it has broken forth with a power, that has conquered death. Through Jesus who lives in their midst God is with them and so they will be able to continue his mission. The Church begins.

So it is in our world. The believer is aware of God's silent presence which does not meet the eye and yet is very real. Exterior conditions do not change and apparently no new resources are given to him for his work. Yet there is the inner assurance, the peace and strength which filled the disciples from the beginning. God has pledged himself to our world in Jesus Christ and can never desert us. This is Paul's confidence: "I am sure that he who began the good work in you will bring it to completion" (Phil 1,6). This awareness of God's presence in power and love, hidden and yet real, is the wellspring of the Christian life. It changes our world and gives an assurance which can never come from outside, from any human support. In this fourth week of the Spiritual Exercises we are meant to deepen and enrich this life of faith.

The directions of St. Ignatius

Thus Ignatius tells us to begin the meditations of this week with the prayer "for the grace to be glad and rejoice

intensely because of the great joy and glory of Christ the Lord" (n. 221). In the Risen Lord God tells us that our world is called out of darkness into his wonderful light and love. In Jesus' earthly life, love had appeared in weakness. It is infinitely vulnerable. It has no weapons, it can never use violence. Love can die, it can never kill. In the Risen Lord, God's love is irreversibly victorious. It can no longer be touched by the powers of destruction. It outlasts hatred. It is the seed of the new creation.

We are further told to meditate how "the divinity, which seemed to hide itself during the passion, now appears and manifests itself so miraculously in its true and most sacred effects" (n. 223). We should not think of divinity and humanity as two agencies which work side by side. They are two levels of existence in Jesus' own life, and in all creation. Jesus' earthly life develops apparently like that of any other man: he is strongly influenced by his surroundings, immersed in his work, in conflict with the various powers of Jewish society, and finally he is destroyed. All seems to take place within the realm of our own experience. There is already, however, the divine dimension shining through; but it is perceptible only to the eye of faith. It does not impose itself. On Easter, in the Risen Lord, this hidden reality shines forth in its full brightness. The Apostles experience profoundly this divine power, that raises Jesus.

It is the sovereign power of God's love. The retreatant is invited now to "consider the office of consoler that Christ Our Lord exercises and compare it with the way in which friends are wont to console each other" (n. 224). Jesus' entire being is 'for us', for the world. In the Risen Lord God's love for us is no longer hemmed in by exterior conditions; the entire Easter event is God's unique gift to us. In fact we know nothing about Jesus' resurrection itself. We know only of Jesus encountering *his own*.

The time of Jesus' apparitions—Luke puts it as forty days—is not just a last stage of Jesus' communication with his disciples. It rather is the beginning of Christ's final and lasting presence in his church. The apparitions are, as it were, the initiation into our life of faith, into the continued awareness

of his presence in our life. The Lord is with us as the light which dispels darkness, as the life that conquers death. We cannot see the light but through the light we see all things; we cannot touch life but it vibrates in every touch. This is our life of faith which unfolds in the fourth week of the Spiritual Exercises. In this precious time we learn to live our life in the presence and power of the Risen Lord.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The Easter liturgy*

The purpose of this day's meditations is to enter into the atmosphere of Easter, as the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ, which is to be lived and realized in the Church and world of today. Thus, a meditation on the liturgy of the Easter vigil in which we celebrate this mystery may be useful. It will be helpful to use the texts as we find them in the missal.

The symbols used in the liturgy:

- Fire is the age old symbol of God: powerful, elusive, transforming. Fire breaks the darkness of the night, it shines forth from the tomb. In the Risen Christ God reveals his power: "Father, we share in the light of your glory through your Son, the light of the world".
- *The Easter candle* symbolizes Jesus in the midst of the Church. It is marked with the titles of the Risen Lord: "Alpha and Omega." Jesus is the beginning and goal of all creation (Rev. 1,8). "All time belongs to him": thus, the number of the current year is engraved. As the Risen Lord transcends all time, so he is present in every hour. "By his holy and glorious wounds may Christ our Lord guard us and keep us": Christ is present in world and history *in his continued passion*. The candle is lit and carried into the Church: "Christ is our light!" "Thanks be to God!" All candles are lit from this Easter candle. Jesus becomes the light of the Church and of the world here and now.

- The “*Exsultet*” is sung. This is a hymn of praise and thanks for the new light of Easter.
- *The liturgy of the word*: in the readings from the Old Testament the divine deeds of creation and salvation are recalled. Central among these texts is the account of Israel’s liberation from slavery and the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14,15-15,1). This exodus remains the type for God’s saving power also in the New Testament, realized in baptism.
- *The baptismal font*: the cleansing, life-giving power of water receives its full meaning in the sacrament of baptism. “By the power of the Spirit give to the water of this font the grace of your Son.”
- *The renewal of baptismal vows*: once more we are faced with the alternative of life and death. We renew and deepen the basic option which was implied in our baptism, rejecting Satan and all that belongs to him, and confessing our faith in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. “May God keep us faithful to Our Lord Jesus Christ for ever and ever.”
- The Easter vigil concludes with the celebration of the Eucharist, the banquet in which we celebrate the communion of the believers in Jesus Christ and anticipate its final fulfilment in God’s glory.

2. *The Women on the way to the tomb* (Mk 16, 1-8).

The biblical account of this morning expresses in a unique manner the newness of Easter. For the women, who are on their way to the tomb, this morning is the continuation of Good Friday and the Sabbath; they wish to care for Jesus’ dead body. *But Easter is not the continuation of the past.* It is the beginning of the new creation, the encounter with the living God. God had spoken in Jesus in our human language; he now speaks, in the same Jesus, his own language, in supreme power and love.

- “Very early on the first day of the week...”: life returns to its normal course after the distressing events of Good Friday. All seems to be as before,

nothing appears changed. Could anything ever really change? Jesus' death has apparently proved once more that this world cannot change, that Jesus' attempt to offer an alternative to our society was doomed to failure.

- "Who will roll away the stone?": they set out for an impossible task. And then, what would really be the meaning of enbalming Jesus, to preserve his human form, to perpetuate him as dead? But these women go out with faith and love; God will answer them in his own way.
- "They saw that the stone was rolled back": the scene has changed. The soldiers are no longer there, a new power is at work.
- "They saw a young man... in a white robe": angels appear where human reasoning has come to an end; here God begins to speak and act.
- "There was a great earthquake" (Mt 28,2): Matthew adds the Messianic sign of an earthquake, the manifestation of God's power, the birthpangs of a new creation.
- "You seek Jesus of Nazareth... He has risen, he is not here": they had known Jesus in his earthly life, which has come to an end. They will now find him in his true life. Where shall they find him?
- "Go and tell the disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee": you will not find him where you have laid him; you find him where you are meant to be, where you need him.
- "You will see him as he told you": you will see Jesus and so be able to be his witnesses. But in him you will see more—in the light of Easter you will see the world, and your own life, in a new way, in its true meaning as God sees it, as the beginning of eternal life. Today is the first day of forever!

OTHER READINGS:

- 1 Cor 15,1-19: The Risen Lord, the assurance of our own resurrection.

- Rom 6,1-11: Dying and rising with Jesus in baptism.
— Col 3,1-4: The new life of the Christian.

QUESTIONS:

1. Are you prepared to share in the life of the Risen Lord by renewing once more, with personal commitment, your baptismal vows?
2. Have you known by your life of faith, in your surroundings and in the events of your daily life, the hidden presence of God, his saving love and power?

FOR REFLECTION

“Without the resurrection love would not be authentic power, without the cross this power would not be love”

J. SOBRINO

THE RISEN LORD WITH HIS OWN

"For forty days after his death he appeared to them many times" (Acts 1, 3).

In ancient visions the era of the Messiah was seen as the time of God's saving presence among his own. Isaiah had called him "Emmanuel", God-with-us (Is 7, 14). This name contained for Israel the assurance of victory over the enemies who threatened the nation. The abiding presence of God with his own is the fulfilment of the covenant. This will be perfected at the end of time: "Behold the dwelling of God is with men. He will dwell with them and they shall be his people" (Rev 21, 3).

Jesus with his own

This ancient expectation comes true already in Jesus' earthly life. He proclaims God's reign as coming. God's presence in our world to heal it, to renew, transform and unite it. He not merely proclaims this new creation; it is being realized in his own person. His miracles are signs of the kingdom, the tangible manifestation of the victory over Satan, sin and death. If Jesus casts out demons in God's Spirit, it is the sign that God's reign has come (cf. Mt 12, 28).

Further, God's reign means peace: rest from labour and rest from enemies. Israel celebrated this rest on the Sabbath, which was for the Jews like an anticipation of the final rest in God's power and love. Its observation had become a

central part of the Law, a test of fidelity to the sacred traditions. At Jesus' time, however, Sabbath rest had been reduced to legal prescriptions full of casuistry. It is significant for Jesus' message that he restores the Sabbath to its true meaning. For him it is the day of God's presence among his people. The assembly in the Synagogue on the Sabbath was for him the occasion for healing and saving life (Mk 3, 4) and for liberating a woman kept bound many years by Satan (Lk 13, 16). These deeds of Jesus were major scandals for the Pharisees. Jesus invited all who "labour and are heavy laden" to come to him: "I will give you rest" (Mt 11, 28). This then is the meaning of Jesus' claim to be "Lord of the Sabbath" (Mt 12, 8): God's final peace is embodied in his person. Through Jesus peace is given to us.

The transparency of Jesus' person—revealing God's own presence and love for us—is found also in the parables. Jesus speaks with compassion to the people who are "harassed and helpless like sheep without a shepherd" (Mt 9, 36) and he describes the concern with which a shepherd searches after the lost sheep (Lk 15, 4-7). Who is the shepherd? The Old Testament points to Yahweh himself. Through his prophets Yahweh accuses useless shepherds for allowing the sheep to be scattered. Yahweh through Ezekiel concludes his accusation with a promise: "I myself will search for my sheep, I will seek them out as a shepherd seeks out his flock when some of his sheep have been scattered abroad" (Ez 34, 11f). In his parable Jesus does not seem to speak about Yahweh but about himself. Jesus justifies his own attitude towards the tax collectors and sinners with whom he consorted and shared meals in terms of a shepherd searching for his sheep. In the same chapter Luke narrates the parable of the prodigal son. Who in this magnificent short story is this father who installs his son again in all his rights and celebrates an extravagant feast for his return? Is it Yahweh who receives sinners? Or is it Jesus who makes these sinners and all rejected, marginalized people feel at home and accepted? Is it not God, whose inscrutable love is revealed in Jesus his Son so that in his presence we should perceive the wonder of his Father's infinitely merciful love?

This, then, is the experience of his disciples: in and with

Jesus they are close to God. The entire gospel of John is written under the heading of God's presence among us. "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth" (Jn 1, 14). In literal translation the text reads: "He pitched his tent among us" — and became the companion on our pilgrimage. As God had been with his pilgrim people during their journey through the desert giving them manna to eat, so Jesus is with us himself as the true manna, the "bread of life" (Jn 6, 35).

Thus, for the disciples to live in his presence in day-to-day life was the core of their 'formation' during Jesus' earthly sojourn. They lived under the impact of his personality. Their understanding was often slow and their petty jealousies would not die out so soon. Jesus did not mind these faults so much, as long as they were ready to continue to follow him. When he picked his intimate circle of the twelve, the first thing he wanted of them was "to be with him" (Mk 3, 14).

However, his earthly presence had limitations. As all human relations it was dependent on local closeness and expressed through the inadequate means of human communication, through words and gestures. As with all human contact it was confined to a limited circle. Even among close friends human sharing remains imperfect. No one is able to speak out his innermost being, and even the most intimate communication leaves us with a feeling of distance that can never be bridged. Besides, Jesus' life with the disciples was very short and remained open-ended. Through the ages we are faced with ever new questions which were never asked nor answered by Jesus. The early Christian community realized it (cf. Jn 14,25). But the short time of being together was sufficient to give them the taste of his presence and to make them realize their deep dependence on him. In fact this profound dependence was the reason for the apostles' total collapse at his death. It seemed that the bond of communion was broken: "You will be scattered, everyone to his own home" (Jn 16, 32).

The presence of the Risen Lord

Easter means the renewed presence of Jesus with his own. This is the meaning of the apparitions. However, it is a presence of an entirely new nature.

Even a superficial glance at the apparition accounts tells us that they are not meant to give us a continuation of Jesus' life story. It is impossible to reconstruct the chronological sequence of the events. E.g. in his concluding chapter Luke places Easter and Ascension on the same day, whereas in the Acts the two events are spaced according to the Jewish calendar so that Jesus appears to his own for forty days, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit falls on Pentecost, when the Jews celebrated the covenant of Yahweh with his people. All the apparition accounts have the one purpose to tell us of the renewed presence of Jesus with his disciples.

The first feature of these encounters is the *initiative on the part of Jesus*: He seeks them, comes to them. Just as their first vocation had been Jesus' own call to follow him — "You did not choose me but I chose you" (Jn 15, 16) — so is also their new encounter with Jesus in which their vocation is renewed. It is the resurrected Jesus' new gift and new call. The Easter experience is not due to the surviving faith of the disciples or the still lurking hope to see him again. Any such reconstruction of the apparitions ignores the basic experience of the disciples as described in these passages. The Easter event is due to God's power once more speaking to them in Jesus the Risen Lord, making them realize that Jesus is with them forever.

Further, after Easter Jesus is with them *in a new way*. During the earthly life his presence was dependent on places and hours. He was in Peter's house, or in a village, or at the seaside. People could search and find him in the temple or synagogue. It is different now. Nobody can trace his going and coming. The two disciples did not expect Jesus when they were on the way to Emmaus returning home after their tragic disappointment. Again Jesus watches his apostles from the shore as they drag their empty net out of the water, after a whole night of fruitless labour. Jesus suddenly stands in their midst in the upper room even though they had locked all doors out of fear. And as imperceptibly as Jesus comes, so he goes. His presence has its own logic: *He is where they are in need, He is for them.*

Another characteristic is that there is nothing conspicuous in his presence. There is no trace of the sensational apocalyptic

wonders, which filled the imagination of the Jews at Jesus' time and against which he had warned them even in his earthly life (cf. Lk 17, 20f). His coming blends into their daily life and has only one purpose — to make them realize that he lives and is *with them*. His apparitions are, as it were, the training of the community of believers for a deeper awareness of God's presence. They shall have to live their life and carry out their work in normal surroundings; yet they must be conscious that God, who raised Jesus from death, is with them.

Finally, all apparitions end with a *mission*. Mission is the very meaning of Jesus' coming: to bring the good news of God's kingdom and to give us the richness and joy of our life and world, a world which often looks like a desert of drudgery and pain. We are sheltered in God's hands and we are intended to grow towards the light—just like a seed, hidden in the dark furrows, gropes towards air and light. In Jesus we know that there is true life and light: in him there is joy and a final promise. This is Jesus' message; it must be shared. No one may close it into his own heart; if we did so, this would be a proof that we have not understood him at all. Where there is Jesus, there is also the new creation which must renew our world. Thus, Jesus tells the women, who come to the tomb, to go and tell the disciples. To the twelve he says: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (Jn 20,21). And finally Jesus sends the apostles to all nations. In Jesus' death and resurrection, therefore, all barriers have been broken. During his earthly life his mission had been limited to the "lost children of the house of Israel" (Mt 15,24). John tells us the story how shortly before his crucifixion the disciples were embarrassed when two Greeks approached them to see Jesus. This was the occasion for Jesus to raise his eyes to a vision of the future, when he will belong to all people: "When I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12,32).

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus encounters Mary of Magdala* (Jn 20, 11-18).

This is the most personal encounter of the apparition narratives. Mary was the ardent follower of Jesus who had healed her (Lk 8, 2). In him she had found her true life,

her very name, which means *beloved, exalted*. She had witnessed to his death and burial.

- “Mary stood weeping outside the tomb”: in this meditation identify yourself with the utter desolation of her loss.
- “She saw two angels in white...”: angels are messengers. In her situation messengers are of no use. No one can replace the Beloved.
- “She turned round and saw Jesus standing, but she did not know that it was Jesus”: *she* can not find him. *No one* can find him, *unless he reveals himself*. But her whole being is in search for him: “tell me... I will take him”.
- “Jesus said to her, Mary”: through her own name, spoken by Jesus, he reveals himself to her. *He* only knew her name, he only had given her identity. In this personal encounter she recognises him.
- “She turned and said to him: *Rabboni*”: He is her teacher, her master. In him she has found herself. This encounter is Jesus’ Easter gift to her.
- “Do not hold me”: this encounter still belongs to her earthly life. She still has her task in this world.
- “Go to my brethren and say to them, ‘I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God’”: the joy and assurance of the Risen Lord now begins to radiate.

2. *Jesus meets the disciples* (Jn 20, 19-23).

Easter is the feast not only of the personal encounter with the living Lord but of the community of Jesus’ disciples. Once again, in a new way, he is in their midst, the source of their faith and mission. It is the experience of the early church.

- “The doors being shut where the disciples were for fear of the Jews”: this is the situation in which Jesus encounters them, closed in, paralysed by fear.

- “Jesus came and stood among them”: his presence among them depends no longer on doors. He is where they are in need of his presence.
- “Peace be with you”: this was the greeting of the first Christmas. Its meaning is now unfolded in the minds of the disciples through the experience of conflict and death. *Jesus’ peace* is not an escape from trouble but the *victory of God’s power and love*.
- “He showed them his hands and his side”: he is the Jesus who suffered but now is in his Father’s glory. Easter is the assurance that love has outlived hatred: life is stronger than death.
- “As the Father has sent me, so I send you”: Jesus’ own coming was only the beginning of God’s reign. His mission must be continued to renew our world.
- “He breathed on them and said: ‘Receive the Holy Spirit’”: the new creation is God’s work; God’s Spirit will work through the disciples.
- “Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven”: this is the mission: to reconcile, to overcome destruction and division.

3. *Jesus, the Good Shepherd* (Jn 10, 11-18).

This parable reflects the life of the early Christian community sheltered in God’s care. It speaks of Jesus as the fulfilment of the ancient promise of Yahweh: “I myself shall search for my sheep”: (Ez 34, 11). Read meditatively the whole parable (Jn 10, 1-18).

- “I am the good shepherd”: Yahweh’s own care for his people is blended with Jesus’ person. Jesus’ care for his own stands in contrast to those who misuse their authority to misguide and exploit the people.
- “The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep”: in his ultimate self-gift unto death for our sake Jesus reveals his whole being, which is love.
- “A hireling...leaves the sheep and flees”: this is the mark of the false shepherd that he is concerned more for himself than for the flock.

- “I know my own and my own know me”: this is Jesus’ intimate union with his own. Just as he knows his Father in intimate union (cf Mt. 11, 27), so he is united with us with unbreakable bonds as our Brother.
- “I have other sheep that are not of this fold... There will be one flock, one shepherd”: Jesus comes to reconcile and unite. He belongs to all. God’s reign proclaimed by him and embodied in him encompasses all people.

OTHER READINGS:

- Ps 23: The Lord is my shepherd (cf Is 40, 11).
- Ez 34: Israel’s shepherds: their negligence, the judgement on them. Yahweh himself will now be Israel’s shepherd.
- Vatican II. P.O. n. 9: The pastoral care of priests.

QUESTIONS:

1. Reflect on the presence of Jesus in your life. Am I aware of his concern and his silent company in all situations and times of my life?
2. Which features in the parable of the Good Shepherd strike me as most significant for me: He lays down his life? He knows his own?

FOR REFLECTION:

“Put on joy which always pleases God and is acceptable to him, and rejoice in it. The joyful man does good, thinks what is good and despises sadness. The sad man always acts evil... because he does not pray and does not praise God... Free yourself of the evil of sadness and you will live for God. All those who throw away sadness and array themselves with joy will live for God.” *The Shepherd of Hermas*, 2nd. cent.

GATHERING HIS OWN: THE CHURCH

"In Jesus Christ you who once were far off have been brought near in the blood of Christ. He is our peace who has made us both one and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2, 13).

Yahweh had made Israel into one nation out of many tribes, his own people. When they were scattered again in exile he gave them the promise that he would "bring back the strayed" (Ez 34, 16). *God unites!* In the prophetic vision the unity is not limited to Israel but comprises all nations: "Many nations shall come and say, 'Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord' . . . and they shall beat their swords into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks . . . They shall not learn war any more. They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree and none shall make them afraid" (Mic 4, 1-4; cf Is 2,2-4). These are not apocalyptic dreams of a heavenly world, once the sordid history of our world is over. It is the prophetic vision of a renewed society which has to be realized in our world.

The community of Jesus' disciples

Jesus takes up this prophetic message in the proclamation of God's reign. A new society must be born, a new community of people. He does not start with a worldwide organization but at the grassroot level, in the small group which he gathers round himself. This will become the pattern for the Chris-

tian community. Can we say that Jesus founded the Church? When we speak of him as the origin of the Church, we cannot conceive his work in terms of organization or legislation, or mapping out the institutional structures for a worldwide organisation. Jesus creates a new community in which the true Israel is being realized in brotherhood. This group has its undisputed centre in his own person. It also points towards structures, a decision-making framework—which would have to develop, because no community can be without structures. Jesus actually sees in the twelve the leaders for a much wider group of his followers. But it is not his concern now to specify these institutional structures; this will be a matter of history under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. His concern is the community itself.

Thus the time which the disciples spent in Jesus' company was of unique significance. They had to realize what God's reign really means in actual life. In fact it would have been entirely useless to issue a proclamation or to make rules and programmes if this new way of life were not really lived. Jesus initiates his disciples into *a new way of living*, of being together and relating to each other, and so to have an impact on the surroundings and on society at large.

To begin with, they had to learn to live together in mutual acceptance and adjustment. The gospels tell us enough of the tensions and rivalries which plagued the small group. They have first to be a real *community*. But then they must overcome the temptation to become cliquish and to consider themselves as a closed group. *Jesus is for the people*. So must his disciples be. When the people crowd round Jesus and get hungry, the disciples suggest to send them to the bazaar before it gets too late. Jesus tells them: "You give them to eat" (Mk 6, 37). The disciples have further to learn to overcome social prejudices which were so marked in Jewish society. It was shocking for "self-respecting" Jews when Jesus shared his meals with tax-collectors. At such violations of their sensibilities the upper classes had shown their disapproval to the disciples (Mk 2,16). In Jesus' company his followers learn to be free with people of all strata of society while giving preference to the poor and the rejected. All this does not make Jesus popular. As a result the disciples have soon to learn to live in an atmo-

sphere of *conflict* with the surrounding world, to be misunderstood, rejected, ridiculed, to feel hostility and the loss of human support. All this they experience in Jesus' company. They learn what it means to be his Church. All these life-experiences of the disciples with Jesus are woven into the gospels and are meant to be read by future generations of Christians.

Easter means for the disciples the renewal of their community: Jesus appears to them once more "speaking about the kingdom of God" and renewing their common mission for the world (Acts 1,3-5). The community which they had experienced on their journeys through Galilee and on their way to Jerusalem must remain for ever and it must be deepened. Their group is meant to be the living cell from which the "body of Christ," the ever growing community of faithful, will develop. After them the Church will always be called "apostolic". She is so not only through the succession of the bishops in the apostolic ministry. The community itself must be apostolic and realize faithfully and in ever new ways the characteristics of Jesus' message and of the community on which Jesus imprinted his Spirit.

The universal Church

Thus the Church must first be universal. God's reign proclaimed by Jesus knew no barriers. The struggle for the full understanding of this universality and its implications began already in the very first generation and goes on through the centuries.

The early church was tempted to fall back into the particularism of the Jewish community. Could non-Jewish believers in Jesus Christ become full fledged members of the community without first accepting Jewish laws and traditions? Already Peter had been guided by the Spirit to admit a Roman officer to baptism (Acts 10). This was a single case. But Paul broke all barriers when he extended his mission beyond the Jewish synagogues and founded hellenistic communities. Some people in Jerusalem protested: "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses you cannot be saved" (Acts 15,1). The Council of Jerusalem decided the issue in Paul's favour (Acts 15,23-29), but such

problems are not settled by decrees. A conversion of heart is needed, the genuine acceptance of Jesus' Spirit and the readiness to face the social consequences. In Paul's letters still rings the passion with which he fought against any narrowness.

However, through the centuries the church somehow retreated, became at times enclosed and was far from universal. She became Western in culture, in structure, in liturgy and in theology. This was especially true in her missionary thrust when the gospel was carried to other nations. In Vatican II, however, she has again articulated herself as the Church for the world and of the world, ready to embrace all nations and cultures. But decrees alone cannot bring about a breakthrough. Our horizon must be widened. All Christians have to ask themselves what Jesus' message means for their continent: for Africa, for Asia, for India. How can the community be structured, the liturgy celebrated, the message proclaimed, so that it has its impact today on our world?

The Church as community

The early church was community. The apostles did exercise their authority, and gradually the structures of the local organization developed. But the Church-experience of the early centuries was that of brotherhood. Granted that the picture presented in the Acts of the Apostles is surely over-optimistic as it leaves out the existing tensions; still it brings out just this sense of unity: "The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul and no one said that any of the things he possessed was his own, but they had everything in common" (Acts 4,32).

The Church had to grow and develop structures of authority, teaching, and service. No one should regret this development which for a community is as essential as the skeleton is for the body, to give it coherence and firmness. But all structures and laws in the Church are for the "good of the whole body" and authority is to be exercised only "in the interest of the brethren".

Not only priests and bishops, all the faithful have to renew their understanding of the Church and to see it first as

community, as togetherness of brothers and sisters in mutual support, help, sharing both in material things and personal life. The Church can never effectively proclaim God's reign unless "she is on earth the seed and beginning of that kingdom." (L.G. n. 5) It will be a matter of serious reflection for the retreatant in these Spiritual Exercises how he looks at the Church and how he sees his place and role in the Christian community.

Jesus in his Church

All renewal of the Church begins with the recognition that Jesus is its lifspring and centre. In daily life we perceive its human reality, often helpful and supporting, at times rigid, impersonal, even hurting, bureaucratic, authoritarian, infested with politics and rivalries. As it is a well established institution it seems often too distant from reality, not sensitive to the struggles and agonies of the people, not responsive to the needs of our time in a fast changing world. Such experiences may come up and trouble us also in days of solitude during the retreat and it is important to reflect on these. A sober assessment of the problems may lead us to a greater awareness of the complexity of most of these problems and make us more tolerant in our judgements, it may also urge us to decisions to take a clear stand.

But we should not expect—during our retreat, especially—to find an answer to all problems! We must learn to live, and also to suffer with problems in the Church in deep faith. For ever Jesus will be the only centre of the Church. This was his final promise: "I am with you always to the close of the age" (Mt 28,20). This holds good also for the local community. "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in the midst of them" (Mt 18,20)—a mystery eluding our comprehension.

Thus there are two ways of looking at the Church. We can see her as a human community with its beauty and vigour, but also with its limitations, failures, even sinfulness. Or we can look at her as the body of Jesus Christ through which he is present in our midst. This twofold aspect of the one Church is meant when the Council speaks with emphasis on the Church as "mysterium" or also with the equivalent term

"sacrament of salvation". "Mysterium" should not be misunderstood as something elusive which defies clear description. It means a reality which fully belongs to our world, yet has a meaning beyond what the eye can see. In and through this visible community of the Church Jesus Christ is present in our midst. Through her very being the Church points at the saving love of God which cannot be seen. Thus the visible church becomes the vehicle, the medium through which God carries on the mission of Jesus his Son, the mission of truth, salvation and love. The Church functions in many ways like a secular community with its laws, offices and manifold activities. But through these manifold channels of human relations and functions God is at work.

This holds good for those who exercise authority in the Church. Through them "the Lord Jesus Christ, supreme high priest, is present in the midst of the faithful" so that through their word "*he* preaches the word of God" and "through their wisdom and prudence *he* directs and guides the people of the New Testament" (L.G. n. 21). So it is with the community of the faithful and with their manifold gifts which are meant "to bear witness to the wonderful unity in the body of Christ. This very diversity of graces, ministries and works gathers the sons of God into one" (ibid. n. 32).

In the solitude of the retreat we may become aware of the urgent need to deepen our sense of belonging and loyalty to the Church. This does not simply mean uncritical approval of all that takes place in our communities and in the Church at large. Loyalty does not mean conformity, blind assent. In fact the one-sided insistence on obedience and the acceptance of the guidance of the Church authorities has contributed much to the lethargy of large sections of Catholic Christians who are used to shift all responsibilities onto the clergy. No one can dispense mature men and women from thinking for themselves and making their own decisions. They have also the right, and at times the duty, to speak out in the proper way. But it always must be done with truth and love. Criticism, however right, is destructive unless it springs from genuine love.

This love of the Church, the sense of belonging in spite of misgivings and disappointments, is the criterion of

the true loyalty to Jesus Christ. Jesus came to build community; whatever destroys community is alien to Jesus.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The disciples on the way to Emmaus* (Lk 24,13-25).

With Jesus' death the community of the disciples began to break up. The two are on their way home; Jesus brings them back to the community.

- "...talking with each other about all these things that had happened": this is not a dialogue. It is a combined monologue of two frustrated men. It never builds community.
- "Jesus drew near and went with them": the first gift of his presence consists in silent listening, allowing them to open their hearts.
- "What is this conversation...": this is the presence of concern with their experiences and situation.
- "He was a prophet...we had hoped...it is now the third day...": this is their disillusionment. Their expectations are shattered. They are unable to come to terms with their experiences. No one can if he remains alone.
- "O foolish men, and slow of heart to believe all that the prophets had spoken": the two had got stuck in their problems, unable to read the wider context which they would have found in the prophets, blind and deaf even to the happenings in the immediate surroundings. They do not listen, to the accounts of the women and of the other disciples. So too do we behave whenever we isolate ourselves.
- "He interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself": they had read these texts often enough, just as we do; but they and we need Jesus himself to explain them.
- "Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?": this cannot be explained. *It can only be accepted—in Jesus Christ.*

- “Stay with us, for it is towards evening...”: this is the christian pilgrim prayer, the prayer that builds community with Jesus, with the Church.
- “He took the bread and blessed...”: the meal is the sign of sharing oneness.
- “Their eyes were opened”: Jesus is recognized by this gesture of community.
- “They rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem”: they join the eleven again, and in their communion they once more encounter the Risen Lord and receive their mission.

2. *Rebuilding the community:* At the lake of Galilee (Jn 21,1-17).

More than other stories this account bears the mark of everyday life with Jesus present inconspicuously, directing them in their work, cooking a meal for them, and no one would ask, “who are you?” In this contemplation be personally present at this scene, immerse yourself in it with all your senses, and in faith.

- “That night they caught nothing”: work without Jesus!
- “Jesus stood on the beach”: there is nothing conspicuous about him. He just blends into the scenery.
- “Cast the net on the right side of the boat”: such advice could come from any experienced observer. Still, by the extraordinary results they recognize Jesus.
- “They hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, one hundred-and-fifty-three”: whatever the mystical significance of the number, it means *universality*, all kinds of fish (Jerome). This was Jesus’ promise: “I will make you fishers of men” (Mk 1,17).
- “Come and have breakfast”: in your meditation share the informal togetherness with Jesus, where no questions are needed. He simply is there.
- “Simon, son of John, do you love me more than

these?": this is the *only* qualification required for his task, for the service of God's people.

- "Feed my sheep": Peter has to continue Jesus' own mission, to teach, to guide, to give his life for the community.
- "Follow me!": Peter's life will no longer be his own. More and more Peter will realize the implications of the very first invitation of Jesus, to come and to follow him (Mt 4:19).

3. *The bond of the community* (Phil 1,3-11).

Paul was linked to the church in Philippi with bonds of special affection. It was the first community on European soil rounded by him (Acts 16,11-40). Of these community bonds he speaks in the first chapter of his letter.

- "I thank my God in my remembrance of you... making my prayer with joy": in spite of the problems of Philippi Paul thinks of the community with gratitude and joy.
- "Thankful for your partnership in the gospel": Paul is always conscious of his authority and responsibility, yet he sees his relationship to the community as *partnership*.
- "He who began the good work in you will bring it to completion:" Paul's hope never fails. It is based not on favourable conditions (which hardly existed) but on the Risen Lord.
- "I hold you in my heart... I yearn for you with the affection of Christ Jesus": his love is human as Jesus' own love for us is human. True human love is the sacrament—the visible, effective sign—of God's own love and concern for us.
- "It is my prayer that your love may abound": The love that builds community is God's gift, it must be implored from him.
- "With knowledge and discernment so that you may approve what is excellent": love must be enlightened and lead to the practical judgements which regulate our daily life.

- “That you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ”: in and through the community we grow towards Christ “to the glory and praise of God”.

OTHER READINGS:

- Jn 17, 20-23: Jesus’ prayer for unity.
— Eph 2,11-22: Walls of separation are broken.
— Eph 4,1-16: One body in Christ.
— Vatican II, L.G. n. 13, the Community of God’s people.

QUESTIONS:

1. What is my attitude towards the Church? To bishops, priests, religious, laity, institutions? Critical, negative or positive? Do I think of them in terms of “they” or “we”?
2. How do I relate to companions, co-workers? Do I see myself as a community builder?

FOR REFLECTION:

“Christ invited men into relationship with him: ‘I have called you my friends,’ he said, in a clear emphasis on the fact that the Christian life reveals itself in the way we walk with one another. ‘Believe in me’ he said, strongly emphasizing the personal nature of Christian faith. In the same way he did not say: ‘Follow these directions’, but ‘follow me’. Over and over he emphasizes the fact that those who drink from the wells of living water do not merely commit themselves to a set of theological propositions; they commit themselves to living in the way Christ did”. E. KENNEDY, *The People are the Church* p. 166.

JESUS SENDS THE DISCIPLES

"I will send you the Holy Spirit from the Father, and he will be my witness, and you too are my witnesses because you have been with me from the beginning" (Jn 15,26f).

Good News

From the beginning, the Christian message was *Good News*. The angel came to Mary with the greeting of joy: "Rejoice (*chaire*), favoured by God" (Lk 1,28). For Elizabeth the coming of Mary was a unique joy: "When the voice of your greeting came to my ear the baby in my womb leaped for joy" (Lk 1,44). Mary sings her song of praise and joy over God's wonders (Lk 1,46). When Jesus is born the shepherds receive the message: "I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people" (Lk 2,10).

So Jesus began his mission with a message of *joy*: "The time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1,14f). When he spoke to the multitudes his words aroused people to joy: "Blessed are you poor, yours is the kingdom of God." (Lk 6,20). Even when the shadows of death fell on his life and the apprehension of his impending departure gripped the disciples, he once more assured them: "These things I have spoken to you that my joy be in you and that your joy may be full" (Jn 15,11).

Jesus' mission must be continued. He called disciples from the very outset of his ministry with the purpose to make

them "fishers of men" (Mk 1,17) and Luke illustrates this intention by connecting the call of the disciples with the account of the rich catch of fish (Lk 5, 1-10). Thus it is natural that all gospels conclude with the final mission of the disciples into the world with the message of salvation.

This is the message entrusted to the Church also today. It is a message of joy and salvation, to awaken the people from fatalistic resignation and despair. But the gospel has sometimes been represented as an imposition on the people, a burden, even as a threat for those who refuse to accept it. It is important to clarify such misunderstandings, because even in the gospels we find expressions which may sound bewildering. In his last chapter Mark tells us how Jesus sent the disciples into the whole of creation with his message of salvation. But then the words are added: "He who does not believe will be condemned". Such words sound harsh. However, they express the experience of the believers who know that they are saved through faith, that refusal of faith would leave them in darkness. These words contain no judgement on people who have no access to faith. God wants to draw all people to himself in love. Love will never use force; it only invites. If I do not respond to it, my life remains empty; it is not the fault of God who loves me but my own failure. John makes it very clear: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life". God's intention is *only to save*, "not to condemn the world". "He who does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God. This is the judgment that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness better than light" (Jn 3,16-19). God has placed life and death in our own hands; by his gift we are free and therefore responsible for our salvation.

Today, more than ever, the Christian message must have a ring of joy and hope, but also of urgency. We know that God can speak to people and nations in a thousand ways and by his own designs draw them to himself. But we are also aware of the terrible powers of destruction. They all rise ultimately out of the human heart (Mt 15,19). If we look into our world with open eyes we see that Jesus' message of God's love and

human brotherhood is not only a matter of individual salvation but of survival for our world. Jesus must find his way into our society.

We may regret that often in the past mistakes have been made in the presentation of the Christian message, when the Church felt that she had to defend her faith with the sword, or when the preaching of the Gospel was too closely connected with political or colonial powers which ruled over the nations. There is, however, little use in blaming past generations for mistakes committed wittingly or unwittingly. We need today the new awareness of the urgency of Jesus' message for our world and the joyful conviction that we, the Church of today, are entrusted with the task to share it with the people.

Our task today

The place of the Church in our contemporary world is different from her role in the past. In many places the Church has lost positions of power; even where she still enjoys institutional strength Catholics may feel threatened and weakened. This should not be a matter of regret. Power intimidates. Power reduces people to subservience. Power creates distance and brings about resentment. How much resistance and even hatred against the Church has been built up during past centuries when in certain countries she dominated politics and social life and controlled education and science!

The Church has recognized that the era of ecclesiastical domination belongs forever to the past. In an irreversible process the world and the nations have come into their own. Vatican II has found an entirely new language in the Church's relation to the world. It is no longer one of ruling or simply teaching, but of solidarity, concern and dialogue. The Constitution on the Church in the Modern World begins with words of love: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor and afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ" (G.S. n. 1). Thus the Council knows "no more eloquent expression of its solidarity and respectful affection for the whole human family, to which it belongs, than to enter into dialogue with it about

all these different problems" (ibid, n. 3). So we are coming closer to Jesus' own approach. He never held any power-position; he never imposed anything on people. He had his message of love and the burning desire to convey it to the people. When they accepted it he rejoiced and praised the Father. When at the end of his life he realised his failure, "he wept over the city saying: 'Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace'" (Lk 19,41). Jesus' message was an offer, an appeal, love can never demand.

In this new situation, however, the Church has to fulfil her inalienable mission for the world, in a way different from political parties or ideological systems. She actually has no clearcut political or socioeconomic programme to offer—just as Jesus had none and so disappointed many who looked for immediate shortcut solutions for the problems of his time. But from Jesus the Church has her basic orientations, and it is her duty to "clarify these problems in the light of the Gospel and furnish mankind with the saving resources which the Church has received from her founder under the promptings of the Holy Spirit" (ibid. n. 3). The Gospel must be read in relation to the world, and the world must be seen in the light of the Gospel.

More than ever it will be important in our world, and in particular in India, to be aware that social and political resources alone are inadequate to renew our society. Our world is God's own creation; only in his power and love can it live and grow. This, however, can be achieved only through people who have learned to listen to God's word and who are guided by his Spirit. Men and women of spiritual insight and commitment are needed in the Church at every level—in places of leadership and responsibility and on the local level, for immediate contacts with all people. Are we not too much a managing church, busy with day-to-day programmes and immediate pressing needs? India needs the praying, listening Church, sensitive to the signs of the time and the promptings of the Spirit.

New dimensions in the Church's mission

Once we have renounced positions of power, we shall understand more readily how much the realization of God's

reign in our world depends on broad *collaboration* within the Church, with all non-Catholic Christians, with all people of good will. The era of isolation is past. Our thinking and planning were too much centred on the institutional aspects: to grow in numbers and influence. There has not been enough service to the world for which Jesus was born and into which the Church is sent. We must learn to see in our neighbours not rivals but allies.

With its concern for all people Vatican II has broken through the defensive walls of isolation. In particular the *Mission Decree* is emphatic on the need of opening out to all others: "Christians ought to insert themselves and collaborate with others in the right ordering of social and economic affairs". They should "share in the efforts of those people who, in fighting against famine, ignorance and disease are striving to bring about better living conditions and work for peace in the world. In this work the faithful, after due consideration, should be eager to collaborate in projects initiated by private, public, state or international bodies, or by other Christian or even non-Christian communities" (A.G. nn. 12).

In fulfilling the Church's responsibility for the world, the role of the *laity* is indispensable. The time has passed when the laity was considered an auxiliary force meant mainly to support the work of the clergy. Modern society can be influenced and renewed only by men and women who "belong to the nation into which they were born, share in its cultural riches by their education, are linked to its life by many societies, contribute to its progress by personal efforts in their profession, feel the problems to be their own and try to solve them" (A.G. n. 21). There remains, to be sure, many a specialized task of pioneering, for which the hierarchy and particular religious institutes are responsible. But their work can never become a substitute for the mission of lay Christians living in ordinary circumstances to make Jesus' message and love tangible and effective in their daily surroundings. The entire Church—laity, religious, and clergy—is entrusted with Jesus' mission, and in our secularized society it is only through the laity that Jesus' message can be communicated.

In the great document on the Church's mission today, the Apostolic exhortation "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*" (1975) Paul VI uses a *new language*: The word 'mission' is replaced by "*evangelization*". Mission in the sense of going out to people who do not know Christ remains an essential task of the Church. However, it is only part of a more *universal responsibility* of all believers to realize God's reign in the whole of human society. All Christians need to open themselves to God's word and to respond to its invitation and challenge. We have to begin with ourselves: how could we ever offer ourselves to the Lord to go out to the people and to proclaim his message as long as our own heart is narrow, prejudiced, loveless, despondent, timid! The Church herself must be constantly purified of rivalries, jealousies, ambitions, lust for power and autocracy. Evangelization means the renewal of everyone: hierarchy, clergy, religious and laity. The awakening of all Christian communities is called for, a renewal in mutual acceptance, love, and support. We need the inspiration of the youth ready to pledge themselves for a new world; we need the revival of the Christian family as the cradle of Christian life. In the Spiritual Exercises the retreatants reflect on their own mission. Each one has to realize it within the frame of his/her own social and professional surroundings. We must be aware that no spiritual renewal is possible in isolation, apart from the world to which we belong. All share in the one mission of the Church to build up the body of Christ.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Jesus' own mission* (Mk 1,21-39)

If you ask yourself how your mission may look in daily life, read the first chapter of Mark which follows Jesus in his earthly mission:

- *Jesus teaches*. Mark does not give the content of the teaching but stresses the way of teaching: "With authority". This points at the absolute authenticity of Jesus' teaching.
- *He casts out a demon*. Jesus liberates from the powers of evil and destruction.
- *In Simon's house Jesus heals the mother-in-law*. Jesus has profound personal concern for people.

- In the evening “he healed many who were sick . . .” this is the touching scene of Jesus’ universal concern.
- In the morning “he went out to a lonely place and there *he prayed*”. His involvement with people is always balanced with the intimate closeness with his Father.
- “Everyone is searching for you” . . . “Let us go to the next towns.” Jesus’ mission is not confined to one place; he is alert and ready for ever new horizons.

2. *The final mission of the disciples* (Mt 28, 18-20).

Jesus’ final words to the eleven disciples remain the inspiration for the Church’s mission through the ages.

- “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me”: what was Jesus’ authority in his *earthly* life? He had no power, no political backing; he never used coercion. He leaves his disciples free: “Would you also go?” (Jn 6,67). His only authority is truth and love. What is the authority of the Church? Do I give true freedom to all?
- “Go”: it is the urge of love not to close in, to wait, but to go out, to meet, to serve.
- “Make disciples”: the goal of christian mission is not primarily doctrinal teaching, nor organization. It is *building community*, bringing people together in Jesus, to embody in this community his Spirit, God’s kingdom.
- “Of all nations”: all people are brothers and sisters. Their communion is based not on social or racial affinities, but on God’s all embracing love.
- “Baptize them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”: baptism is not a ritual but a consecration. Those who commit themselves to God’s kingdom have God as Father. They are brothers and sisters of Jesus; they are renewed and united in his Holy Spirit. The community of the Church is not man-made; it is born of God.
- “Teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” Share Jesus’ message!. All teaching

and preaching of the Church must ring with the joy of Jesus' own message. This is the norm by which we ought to examine all our teaching.

- "I am with you always to the close of the ages": the ancient assurance given to the poor of Yahweh—Moses, Gideon, Mary—is now extended to the whole Church, for all times.

3. "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*" (1975) gives us the modern perspectives of evangelization.

This document embodies the contributions made by the bishops in the Synod on Evangelization, 1974. Pope John Paul II called it the testament of Paul VI. Read the main numbers of the document of which the key words are given here:

- Evangelization is not limited to preaching and baptizing, n. 17.
- It consists in "bringing the good news to all strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new". Its aim is "to convert the personal and collective consciences of people", n. 18.
- Its goal consists not in mere geographic expansion of the Church but in "affecting and as it were upsetting through the power of the Gospel mankind's criteria of judgement...", n. 19.
- The Gospel is independent of any culture but "capable of penetrating them all without becoming subject to any of them" n. 20.
- The primary content of evangelization is the "witness that in his Son God has loved the world", n. 26.
- The Gospel concerns "man's concrete life both personal and social", n. 29.
- In particular, it concerns liberation from all enslaving and destructive forces: "The Church has the duty to proclaim the liberation of millions of human beings... the duty of assisting the birth of this liberation, of giving witness to it, of ensuring that it is complete. This is not foreign to evangelization.", n. 30.

— However, evangelization must not be reduced “to a man-centred goal...to material well-being... forgetful of all spiritual and religious preoccupations...If this were so the Church would lose her fundamental meaning.” n. 32.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Mt 9,35-10,9: Jesus' mission must be extended and continued through the Twelve.
- Lk 4, 16-21: Jesus' mission of liberation for the poor.
- 1 Cor 3,5-27: Servants of the Lord.
- 1 Cor 9,12-27: All things to all men.
- Vatican II, A.G. n. 15. Building Christian Communities.

QUESTIONS:

1. How do I understand the mission of the Church today? In India?
2. What is my specific task within this mission?

FOR REFLECTION

“We are fortunate to be living in an age that is truly great for the Church; for never in the past has mankind had such a chance to realize to what extent Christian love in all dimensions is the indisputable law for our very survival, the survival of humanity, for progress and for a peaceful organisation of the earthly city.”

R. VOILLAUME

OUR HOPE

"All creation waits with eagerness for God to reveal his sons" (Rom 8,19).

The entire Bible is a history of promise and hope. God created an *unfinished* world and entrusted it to us—"Multiply, fill the earth and subdue it". All God's gifts are tasks and promises. When we failed, and the powers of evil engulfed us, his assuring promise gave us new strength. God will always remain with us in the struggle against evil; the seed of the woman "will bruise the head of the serpent" (Gen 3, 15). When Israel's history began Abraham was told to leave his own country with the promise of the land that God will show him (Gen 12,1). This land of promise remained the magnet that attracted Israel through the millennia. It was the hope of Israel when under Moses' guidance they moved out of Egypt. "I will bring them to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey" (Ex 3,8). Later, in the distress of exile, Yahweh speaks once more: "I will take you from the nations...and bring you into your own land" (Ez 36, 24). So it goes on until the Bible ends with the vision of fulfilment: "And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem coming down from heaven" (Rev 21, 2).

Man cannot live without hope; every day has its little expectations. Children wait for the next holiday; we look forward to promotions, to meeting friends. Young people plan their future and look out for their partners.

Hopes are dangerous. Many hopes remain unfulfilled, or the fulfilment does not come up to our expectations. We are disappointed, disillusioned. Many people are frustrated if obstacles against their hopes pile up too high, and life seems to deny the promised fulfilment. And so some become bitter, cynical; they close themselves in.

At the end of the retreat I must ask myself earnestly: What really are the hopes that sustain my life?

Jesus' Hope

The hopes of people are different, but have a common origin. All hopes grow from the inadequacy of the actual conditions in which we are living and reach out towards the unknown, into a world of desires and expectations. These hopes shape the entire life of people, of whole nations. Jesus knew it when he said: "Where your treasure is, there is your heart also" (Mt 6, 21).

Jesus lived in a restless world and was surrounded by different hopes, individual and collective. All Jews at his time felt the need of something new to come in the political, social and religious decadence of their nation, but they looked in different directions for an answer. There were those who still hoped for the political restoration of Israel under a new Son of David, a revolutionary hero who would lead them to armed victory. History tells us how these hopes finally led to the inevitable military confrontation with the Romans and to the destruction of Jerusalem. — There were, on the other side, the apocalyptic hopes, the expectation of God's powerful triumph over this evil world and the establishment of his own kingdom on the ruins of our world and history. This hope embodied the unshakable faith of the nation in Yahweh's power, but it did not change the actual world and led many to narrow self-righteousness. They gloried in the observation of the law and the traditions but did not touch the actual urgent tasks that lay at their doors.

Jesus lived in the midst of these hopes, dreams, illusions. He was not carried away by any of them. He had his own message of hope: God's reign is at hand, it is in the making, but it is not yet fully revealed. It still is a promise. It is like the seeds

that sleep in the furrows of the field with the promise of the harvest.

Jesus does not offer any spectacular hopes, nothing that can be seen and admired. Such would only be a diversion from his real message, from God's reign, the new creation, the new communion of brotherhood among all people, which does not come through human power, but from the Spirit. It must be born in our hearts and it has an assurance of fulfilment, which is based not on human resources but on God alone.

Jesus has to live out this message of hope in his own life. In his own person he had to realize what hope is. He has experienced both its joys and its agonies. No one could speak with greater assurance about the coming of God's reign than he. God's reign rings through every one of his parables: the seeds sown into the field will bear fruit, though many seem to be wasted; the good harvest will be brought into the barns in spite of the tares which were sown into the fields; what joy fills the heart of the lucky merchant who has discovered the precious pearl! And to those who earnestly seek God's kingdom, Jesus promises that all the rest will be given to them (Mt 6, 33). Yet, no one's faith has been tested as that of Jesus: He realizes the growing resistance against his message and person; even his disciples in their pettiness seem to be blind to the vision of true brotherhood. Where is God's power when Jesus faces the final breakdown of his efforts and he offers to God "prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears" (Hebr 5,7)! In going through his agonies Jesus becomes "the pioneer and perfecter of our faith", because "he endured the cross for the joy that was set before him, despising the shame" (Hebr 12, 2).

This is the hope Jesus communicates to the disciples during his earthly life. They too, like all of us, were tempted to look for shortcut solutions in the search for a better world. They felt like joining the politic movement of the zealots, but in their heart they sensed that this was not the answer to the real problems of their world. God's reign is more than the change of political structures. Neither would Jesus allow his followers to yearn for spectacular events such as were expected by the apocalyptic writers. "The kingdom of God

is not coming with signs to be observed, nor will they say 'here it is' or 'there'. For behold, the kingdom of God is in the midst of you" (Lk 17, 21). This is Jesus' sobering answer to all such dreams: never expect the world to be changed by spectacular events. Unless his reign comes here, in our midst, in the world of our daily life and work, it will not come at all.

Jesus then tells us that when God's reign in fact does arrive, we can hardly observe it. He tries to make it clear in some of his parables in which he uses striking contrasts: the reign of God is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds. But it grows into a tree and gives shelter to the birds of the sky. Again it is like the leaven which a woman takes and mixes into three measures of meal till all is leavened (cf Mt 13, 33-35). There seems to be no proportion between these insignificant beginnings and the final outcome. This precisely is the coming of God's reign. Jesus therefore trains the disciples in this hope. They see this hope embodied in him: He gives the vision of a new world which comes from God and must be realized by us. In him we see the courageous struggle against evil. We see also his rejection, the agony, the patience, the unfailing faith. In his resurrection the final victory is revealed.

The hope of the Church

What hope really means could be understood by the disciples only after Easter. Whatever earthly expectations they had pinned on Jesus had died and had been buried with his dead body. In the encounter with the Risen Lord they learned that real hope which carried the pilgrim Church through the centuries of her history.

The paschal hope first gives them the assurance which only God, who is the source of all life, can give. The disciples encounter Jesus alive, he who had died and was buried. The Easter revelation comes while they are still under the shock of Golgotha's disaster. Now Jesus lives and stands in their midst, the same Jesus who had been nailed to the cross. Here God is at work, God Creator and Saviour, "who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist" (Rom 4, 17). From now on they know that both their

life and God's kingdom are not based on their own resources but have their roots in the unfathomable mystery and power of God in his love which they cannot explain, for which they have no claim. Yet, this love is with them; they can rely on it. This is the experience which Paul has in his apostolate: "We are afflicted in every way but not crushed; perplexed but not driven to despair; persecuted but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed, always carrying in the body the death of Jesus so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (2 Cor 4, 8-10).

As every great word of the Bible can be misinterpreted so also the biblical message of hope. Already among the first Christians at Thessalonica there were disciples who so banked on the early coming of the Lord in his Parousia that they thought there was no need to continue in their daily work and toil. Paul has hard words for such people: "We command you, brethren, in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is living in idleness and not in accord with the tradition" (2 Thess 3, 6). Never is the hope for the coming glory an excuse to cease from labour in this world or to avoid struggles and conflicts in our life. Jesus is for ever the sole model of our hope: his life was a struggle against evil, struggle which was crowned in his resurrection.

Christian hope is not idle. It is the hope for a harvest which must be sown with confidence. It is the assurance of *God's* victory in us over evil, sin and death, but only after *we* ourselves have fought against the dark powers. Hope in the Risen Lord gives vigour to the work and struggle of every Christian and inspires the Church in her mission. It also gives strength to persevere when human efforts fail. God's reign is entrusted to us. It is for the Church to proclaim and realize it on this earth; it will be for God alone to reveal it in its fulfilment.

True, hope looks towards the future; it is waiting for fulfilment. But hope does not turn us away from the present, from our actual world. The future is already with us as the tree is already in the mustard seed. God is with us. The indwelling Holy Spirit is the "guarantee of our inheritance" (Eph 1, 14). Our world is pregnant with the Christ-life of salvation and our agonies are the travails of this new creation. In

Jesus' own language: "When a woman is in travail, she has sorrow because her hour has come; but when she is delivered of the child she no longer remembers the anguish for joy that a child is born into the world" (Jn 16, 21). Our waiting for the new creation has nothing of the dull emptiness of a waiting room; it is filled with the active joys of Advent. The thoughts of a mother are with the child in her womb, while her body gives it shelter and builds its limbs. So it is with the Christian's hope for God's kingdom. We are constantly busy, building up Christ's body in our world, sharing also in his struggle and passion, so that we "may know him and the power of his resurrection" (Phil 3, 10).

From the very beginning the Gospel was a message of hope. Early Christians had nothing to boast about or to rely upon. They were a poor community, made up to a great extent of slaves — suspected, harassed, persecuted. But they could never be broken. They had an inner strength from the Risen Lord that made them face life and death without fear. In the midst of a society characterized by aimless drifting, cheap pleasures, and fatalistic resignation, Christians were united in their faith in Jesus Christ, who had conquered death.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *The Ascension* (Acts 1, 3-12).

The Ascension is the concluding account of Jesus' life and the first scene in the history of the Church. It comprises both sides of the Christian hope: the earthbound mission of the disciples into the world, and the divine assurance of fulfilment.

- "He presented himself alive after his passion": this is the meaning of his apparitions — Jesus lives and is with his own.
- "Speaking about the kingdom of God": this was Jesus' message which is now entrusted to his Church.
- "You shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit": just as Jesus went about his mission guided by the Holy Spirit (Lk 4, 14:18), so the Church can fulfil her mission if she is guided, and allows herself constantly to be led, by the Holy Spirit.

- “Lord, will you at this time restore the kingdom of Israel?”: even after the experience of Jesus’ death and resurrection the disciples are still unable to forget their dreams of power and earthly domination. Will the Church ever outgrow such dreams!
- “You shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem... Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth”: these are the ever widening circles of the Church’s mission.
- “As they were looking on, he was lifted up”: they experience the end of the first phase of their discipleship, the physical companionship with Jesus.
- “A cloud took him out of their sight”: for Jesus this separation means the fulfilment of his life in union with his Father. The cloud is the symbol of God’s presence.
- “They were gazing into heaven as he went”: This is the situation of the Church, of the world. She comes from God, she goes to God. But her place is on earth.
- “Why do you stand looking into heaven?”: their task is now *on earth*. Jesus will bring history to fulfilment
- “Then they returned to Jerusalem”: in your meditation be with them on the way back into the holy city, to wait for the Holy Spirit, to be ready for their great task. This way back to Jerusalem is the beginning of the Church’s journey through the centuries of her history and mission.

2. *The expectation of all creation* (Rom 8, 18-26).

Read this text with a deep sense of solidarity with the entire creation, with all the pain and agony of our world, with all who struggle for a better world and often lose hope.

- “The sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory which is to be revealed to us”: this is the vision of faith which comprises the struggles and agonies of our world in the light of the final glory which shines forth in Jesus Christ.

— “Creation was subject to futility”: it loses its very meaning if man, the crown of creation, betrays his destiny. World and history have meaning only in man. They lose their meaning if man is no longer God’s image. The world is waiting, God has given us hope.

— “Also we ourselves, who have received the first fruit of the Spirit... wait for the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies”: we are redeemed and sealed by the Holy Spirit, but still, along with the whole world, we wait for the full revelation of our sonship.

— “In hope we are saved”: we *are* saved! Work and struggle are not lost but sustained by God’s promise, to which we cling in hope.

“We hope for what we do not see”: this is the very essence of Christian hope. All human hopes are based on empirical data, on our calculations; they are spelled out by computers. The hope of the Christian life, of God’s kingdom, has no verifiable basis. It rests on God alone.

— “The Spirit intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words”: it is not possible to rationalize and spell out the ultimate assurance of our life. The Spirit in the depth of our heart leads us on.

3. *The final splendour* (Rev 21, 1-5).

This is the vision of fulfilment in which human history is completed. It is expressed in apocalyptic language.

— “I saw a new heaven and a new earth” New means closeness to the origin. In the biblical sense heaven and earth are new because in their origin they come from God, they are sustained by God, and are fulfilled in God.

— “The first heaven and the first earth have passed away”: the limitations, struggles, anxieties of this life have come to an end.

- “The sea was no more”: the sea was considered the realm of chaos, danger and destruction. All these have been vanquished forever.
- “I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God”: it bears its old name, it is the city which had been built by human hands, with the glories, anxieties, catastrophes of its history. Now it comes from God, it is the holy city as God meant it, as it is fulfilled in his glory.
- “Prepared as a bride adorned to meet her husband”: this is the ultimate destiny of all creation, to be fulfilled in our union with God.
- “God will dwell with them, and they shall be his people”: this recalls the old covenant with Israel on Sinai. His people now comprises all nations; they are fulfilled in glory, beyond human reckoning.
- “He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and death shall be no more”: The pain of our broken world is healed.
- “Behold, I make all things new”: I hear these words as spoken to me. I belong to the new creation.

OTHER READINGS:

- Jer 30: God restores Israel.
- Jer 31, 15-22: I have created something new.
- Rev 5: The mystery of history, the book with the seven seals.
- Rev 21 and 22: The vision of fulfilment.
- Vation II, L.G. n. 48, The Pilgrim Church.

QUESTIONS:

1. Do I realise the difference between the many little hopes that fill my daily life, and my one big HOPE?
2. Does this HOPE give me vigour in my daily life and in my apostolic work? Does it inspire me with patience, perseverance, assurance, courage?

FOR REFLECTION

"The secret of prayer is a hunger for God and the vision of God, a hunger that lies far deeper than the level of language and affection."

THOMAS MERTON

"We could not seek God unless he had already found us. We cannot learn to desire God because he must find us first."

PASCAL

THE SPIRIT OF JESUS

"If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will pray the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor, to be with you for ever, the Spirit of truth (Jn 14, 16).

What will happen after Jesus? It is the question asked in every new enterprise or movement which was conceived and built through the vision and personality of a great man: who will succeed him? Whom has he groomed to carry his work into a new era?

Jesus has no successor. He is and remains the only Lord of his Church. Offices in his Church are not meant to replace him but to make him, his own authority and saving grace, present and effective to all later generations. The community of disciples will for ever remain his own Church he has assured us. *"I shall be with you to the end of the ages"* (Mt 28,20).

But how will the authenticity of his teaching be guaranteed? Who will interpret it to future generations? Who will hold the disciples together and save them from the divisive forces which are bound to buffet them? Who will preserve among them the unity which will be threatened and attacked from the beginning and which will be assaulted more and more as numbers increase and as the Church will include ever more heterogeneous groups and cultures? Most important, who will uphold and foster the impact of his personality, the assurance he was able to give to his disciples even in

critical situations? As long as he was with them they always felt sure, too sure, of their future and their mission, but as soon as he was taken from them on Mount Olive they were scattered. Who can take his place?

The other Advocate, the Counsellor

Jesus' discourses during the last meeting with the disciples (Jn 13-17) deal precisely with this problem. He assures them that he will remain with his own through his Spirit, the Advocate, the Counsellor, whom he will send from the Father. So powerful is this assurance that Jesus makes the startling statement: "It is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away the Counsellor will not come to you; but if I go I will send him to you" (Jn 16,7). Jesus' presence among the disciples was needed to give them the concrete experience of his personality and of God's kingdom embodied in him. His disciples had to realize it in actual life, by the way Jesus related to them and to the people: they had to experience him in the face of adversaries, in suffering and death. There is no substitute for this existential encounter with his person. In Jesus God has revealed himself to us. In him he has revealed also the full meaning of our human existence and of true community.

But the encounter with Jesus in his human life should not become a limitation. The disciples are not meant just to repeat his words and to copy his deeds. God surely did not want that all followers of Jesus should belong to that small, narrow Palestinian world and culture in which Jesus lived. Thus Jesus had to go, but his message belongs to the whole world. He sends the Holy Spirit, his Spirit and the Spirit of the Father.

Who is this Spirit of Jesus? Perhaps we should ask first more simply: what is Jesus' spirit? What is the spirit of a person? It comprises the richness and depth of his life. It includes the vision from which his message and teaching spring, the sustaining power of his work and struggle, his attitudes towards nature, towards the world, towards people. But it is much more; it simply cannot be defined. It is the atmosphere people breathe when they come into Jesus' presence, the peace and rest he radiates in the midst of

tensions, the joy he inspires and the attraction that draws people spontaneously to himself and to the Father. It is the lifespriing of his actions and words, which animated all encounters with people. It is the unspeakable wonder of God with which his life was filled, beyond understanding—because the spirit is like the wind; you do not know from where it comes and whither it goes. And yet, this spirit is so much more real than the single words or deeds which people perceived. It is the divine wonder which does not take him away from us, which makes him truly human, so that in his presence we actually begin to understand what it means to be human and what our life ought to be. At the same time it makes us feel closer to God than any sacred celebration, so that in him we begin to realise who God is.

This Spirit of Jesus is *God* himself—not God in the distant heaven whom no one has ever seen but God present in our world. God's spirit it is who moves over the primeval waters so that chaos becomes cosmos and order. God's Spirit enters into dead matter, so that it begins to breathe. It is the Spirit who comes and enlivens Israel's history, so that broken people suddenly become valiant and free. It is the Spirit who in times of despondency and confusion gives guidance and new confidence through the prophets. It is the Spirit through whose power Jesus was conceived. He descended on Jesus at the beginning of his mission and guided him in every stage of his life. It is the Spirit whom the disciples need. They will not be allowed by this Spirit merely to copy Jesus; nor will He let them just repeat what Jesus has done and taught. The world is wide open with its immense potential, and history must unfold creatively through the centuries. Our entire world must become God's kingdom; this can come about only through the Spirit of Jesus Christ. Jesus' earthly life must end; his Spirit must come.

Jesus' Spirit in the Church and in the World

Jesus' promise of the Holy Spirit is expressed in three key words: (1) The Father "will give you another Counsellor (Advocate), *to be with you for ever*, the Spirit of truth" (Jn 14,16). Jesus' mission is not confined to a particular situation. God's reign is co-extensive with the world and its history; it is meant

to become the new creation. While Jesus goes, his Spirit must remain, the same divine presence and power that guided his earthly life in the villages of Galilee and in Jerusalem. He is the Spirit of truth, source and lifspring of all that exists and moves. He leads all creation to its destiny; through Him it is to be transformed into God's kingdom, to become the holy city of God. He will be with us *for ever*.

(2) Further, "*He will teach you all things* and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn 14,26). He will not add anything to Jesus' message but he will explain and interpret it. "He will not speak on his own authority, but whatever he hears he will speak" (Jn 16,13). This may sound bewildering. Has not God spoken through the ages with increasing clarity and depth, in Israel, and in all nations, through Moses, through prophets, through wise and holy men and women? Would God ever cease to speak to us? It is indeed difficult to conceive of Jesus as the consummate end of revelation as if in the future we would have only to hand on, to defend and clarify what has been told already in the past. Is not the whole of human history an ongoing revelation of God in and through man with ever wider horizons and ever deeper insights into the mystery of man, world, and of God himself?

So it is, and in fact each human being is called upon to have his and her share in this ongoing revelation. Every human life has its own depth and in every human person there is something new, something unrepeatable of God's wonder. Still, there is a finality in God's revelation through Jesus, something unique and unrepeatable. God tells us in Jesus that this world of ours is, and for ever will be, in his hand. This will be questioned a thousand times. People will be tempted to consider their life as lost and the whole world a gamble. Jesus does not discuss our problems, but in his entire life, death and resurrection he spells out the unspeakable truth: "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3,16). God gave us freedom and we have wandered not only through valleys of tears but also through the mysterious, dreadful abysses of wickedness and hopelessness. But no one can take away or change what God has told

us in Jesus, that he loves this world of ours and that it will find its fulfilment in him.

All happenings, therefore, in this world are securely embraced in God's sovereign providence and incorporated into the final destiny of all creation. There is then no limit to growth in this world or to ever new insights. New cultures may be born and new philosophies develop. The explosion of knowledge will continue and human control over the resources of this world will be ever stronger. New problems will arise, evil will increase, and it will make use of the ever greater powers at our command. All this, however, cannot change our ultimate destiny: this world belongs to God. This is the revelation in Jesus Christ, it is the work of the Holy Spirit.

(3) Finally, the Counsellor, the Spirit of truth "*will bear witness to me; and you also are my witnesses* because you have been with me from the beginning" (Jn 15,26f). A witness is more than a source of information. He who gives witness in court not only contributes his knowledge but stands for its credibility. This is what Jesus' disciples need in their mission, what we today need more than ever. Jesus' message will be questioned, challenged, attacked. Right from the beginning it had been rejected by the leaders of the people and the majority of the Jews. Many of these seemed to be well intentioned people. Were the few disciples who believed in Jesus right? And, suppose Jesus was right in his time, is his message anything more than a reaction against the social and religious decadence of his time? Has it value in other cultures, in later ages, for *all* people, for *me*?

Such questions cannot be answered by mere rational arguments. They have been discussed through centuries. Those who reject Jesus' divine mission will continue to interpret the events of Jesus life and person by means of social and psychological categories. The believers in Jesus Christ will offer counter arguments. Such discussions are useful because the complexity of the problems comes more and more to the surface. However, we should not expect them to lead to cogent conclusions. What then makes us really see the truth? Where shall we find a final assurance?

Take an example from daily life: you have a friend. You know his mind, his aspirations, his 'spirit', and you trust him.

Someone tells you a malicious story about him, that he has committed some fraud. You simply laugh. "I know him, this is just not possible!" What are your arguments? You have studied the evidence which may, or may not be fully conclusive. But your conviction is ultimately based not on any exterior evidence but on the knowledge you have of your friend. You know his 'spirit'. This is exactly what Jesus tells us about the ultimate assurance of our faith. Jesus sends the Holy Spirit, the same Spirit that descended on him and guided him. He is the Spirit of God, who in the beginning hovered over the chaos. He is the Spirit of truth. The Spirit alone comprehends all that exists. He opens your eyes to the wider context of events, the fuller sense of words, to the hidden truth that can only be grasped intuitively by the heart. He does not dispense you from thinking, but He gives you the clarity and assurance, you may call it a *spiritual instinct*, that cannot fail you. So you know that Jesus is right and that his message is valid also today, for our world. You also know that the true meaning of your life depends on the faithful-lived-acceptance of his message. You will not be afraid of present or future ideologies. You will always remain ready to learn and joyfully recognize whatever is true and beautiful in the world of ancient religions and in modern movements. Never will you be a narrow fanatic, for God's Spirit will keep your heart open and at peace.

Thus will you also be able to be a witness to Jesus—as he told his disciples—because you too have been with him and are guided by his Spirit. You are not merely a teacher who is able to explain doctrine but a person of living faith and conviction. You will be able to stand by your words, for you carry out in your life what you speak and teach. The joy and strength of Jesus' message, of the Christian vocation, will be progressively embodied in you so that also your words will carry more and more conviction. You are his witness. This is what Peter told Christians who lived in totally non-Christian, hostile surroundings. Through your life you will "declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet 2,9).

This is also the final gift of your retreat. You followed Jesus in your meditations through the days of his earthly life

and have patterned your mind and heart after him. You need his Spirit and the assurance of his continued presence and guidance in your personal life and in your mission. His Spirit gives you the assurance that through Him your own life and work are woven into God's design, the coming of God's reign!

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *God's Spirit in Israel's history*

The prophets hailed the messianic time as the era of God's Spirit.

- "I will pour out my spirit over all flesh" (Joel 2,28f; cf Acts 2,17f): no longer will the Spirit of God be given only to prophets and leaders of the people. God's entire people will be filled with him, men and women, young and old.
- "I will put my spirit in you and I will see that you follow my law" (Ez 36,27): the laws of the old covenant were written on tablets of stone, and imposed on the people. The law of the new covenant will be imprinted into human hearts: God will lead his people from within, in freedom, through the Spirit.
- "I baptize with water, he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit" (Mk 1,8): through his baptism John the Baptizer led the people to repentance. Jesus not only prepares their hearts for God's reign but shares his own Spirit.
- "If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink... 'Out of his (Jesus') heart shall flow rivers of living water'. This he said about the Spirit which those who believed in him were to receive" (Jn, 7, 37f). This is Jesus' own promise of the Holy Spirit. It is connected with the feast of the tabernacles on which the Jews commemorated God's mighty deeds during the journey through the desert. On the last day they carried water jars in procession to celebrate the water from the rock given to them by Yahweh.

This gift is fulfilled in Jesus' own person. The Symbol is fulfilled in Jesus himself when through his death he gives us the Holy Spirit. It is symbolized on the cross when from the opened side of the expired Jesus blood and water flow (Jn 19,34).

- The most explicit promise is contained in the texts on the "Counsellor":—Jn 14,16f; 14,26; 15,26f; 16,7-15. cf. above.

2. *Pentecost* (Acts 2,1-21).

It is the harvest feast, which in later Judaism was associated with the Covenant on Sinai. Thus Luke sees in the Holy Spirit's outpouring on the Church the inauguration of the New Covenant.

- "They were all together in one place": Mary with them (Acts 1,14). It is the beginning of the Church and its mission.
- "A sound came from heaven like the rush of a mighty wind": the invisible power of the wind symbolizes the presence and working of the Holy Spirit in the Church (cf. Jn 3,8).
- "Tongues of fire which parted and came to rest on each of them": fire is the ancient symbol of God (cf. the burning bush). It descends on each one individually. The church is the communion of the believers; each one is called personally. Each one has his gift of the Spirit, all are united in this same Spirit.
- "They began to speak in other tongues": all understood them. This is the sign of the new unity, based on the one message of salvation, understood and received by each one within his own life-situation.
- "All were amazed and perplexed saying to one another: 'What does this mean? This is something new'." : For those who believe, it is the wonder of the new creation, for others, it is an occasion for mockery.
- "Peter, standing with the eleven, lifted up his voice": this is the first proclamation of the Christian

message through the Apostles, leading up to the confession of Jesus as Lord and Messiah, and the gathering of the first community (2,36-42).

3. The gifts of the Holy Spirit

The entire Christian life is the unfolding of the life of the Spirit given to all believers. It is mostly in Paul's letters that the richness of this life has been spelled out. Read the following texts slowly, with a meditative mind.

- The *understanding* of God's word comes to us through the Holy Spirit: 1 Cor 2. Paul preached to the Corinthians the message of Jesus crucified, "that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God" (2,5).
- The Holy Spirit reveals to us *our sonship of God*: Gal 4,4-6. God sent his Son "that we might receive adoption as sons". Sonship of God, however, is not merely a legal status; it is meant to penetrate the depth of our consciousness. Only the Holy Spirit, sent into our hearts, gives us the intimate awareness of this sonship and makes us cry out: "Abba, our Father." (cf. Rom 8,12-17). In the Spirit we also can pray (Rom 8,26).
- The Spirit of *unity*, Eph 4,3-6: "There is one body and one Spirit." The unity of the Church is rooted in the one Spirit of Jesus Christ, who unites all believers in one faith, hope and love. He brings us together also in the visible unity of the Church, into one body.
- The Holy Spirit is the inspiration for the Church for her *mission* (Acts 1,4-8). The first missionary enterprise started from the young community at Antioch: "While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said: Set apart for me Barnabas and Paul for the work for which I have called them" (Acts 13,2). All new endeavours in the Church are marked by the promptings of the Holy Spirit. Reflect on these promptings in your own heart, your own life.

- The *many gifts* of the one Spirit, 1 Cor 12, 4-13. The unity of the Church is made up of the richness of the spiritual gifts which are freely given to all members of the community: "To each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good".
- The *guarantee of fulfilment*, Eph, 1,11-14. On the pilgrimage to our final destiny and in the continuous struggle between grace and sin in the world and in our own heart, the Holy Spirit is "the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it to the praise of his glory".

OTHER READINGS:

- Jn 3, 1-8: Born anew of the Spirit. The scene with Nicodemus.
- Gal 5,16-26: Life in the Spirit and its fruit.
- Vatican II, L.G. n. 12b. Charisms in the Church.

QUESTIONS:

1. Try to remember, and re-live vividly, occasions when you realised the enlightening, life-giving power of the Holy Spirit in yourself. Think of others in whom you could observe similar experiences.
2. What is your special gift from the Holy Spirit, your main "charism"? Have you in gratitude recognized it, accepted it, fostered it? Do you use it for the good of others: your neighbour, the Church, people at large?

FOR REFLECTION

"Human beings can see Jesus as the Son, and draw closer to the Father only if they live a life in accordance with the Spirit of Jesus. We can come to know Jesus as the Christ only insofar as we start a new life, break with the past and undergo conversion, engage in Christian practice and fight for the justice of God's kingdom."

J. SOBRINO.

DIVINE LOVE

"The first commandment is this: Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Mk 12,29-31).

The concluding day of the Spiritual Exercises is devoted to the "contemplation to attain love of God" (nn. 230-237). This day is no longer part of the fourth week but stands by itself. Just as the contemplation on the kingdom of Christ stands by itself, since it is meant to focus the mind of the retreatant on the person and mission of Jesus which is to be unfolded in the three following weeks, so the contemplation on divine love sums up the entire movement of the Spiritual Exercises and its dynamism: God's love for all men—for me, and my response to him. It is a movement which originates in God when he creates the world, when he sends his Son for our salvation and when he pours out his Spirit on all creation. This movement necessarily returns to God from the world—from me, through Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit.

What is love?

The great words of our language have been used in many ways. Thus 'love' has been praised as the divine power that raises us to God's own realm. But the same word is used for mere emotional attachments and even for enslaving passion.

Love can be possessive, binding, smothering, clinging; it can become a prison. But authentic love liberates and sets us free for our true life.

When Jesus speaks about love he adds a significant qualification: "Love one another *even as I have loved you*" (Jn 13,34). In Jesus God tells us what love really means, God's love for us and our response to him, and the expansion of this love towards our neighbour, towards all people.

God the *Father's love* is creative and liberating. In the beginning he created light, stars, sun and moon and our earth with plants and animals. But all these have no real meaning as yet because they have no freedom of their own; they cannot respond to God. God saw that they were good, but he cannot love them. Love asks for a response. So he creates man after his image and likeness. He gives us all the treasures of the earth and all the hidden potentialities of the oceans, the universe, the atoms. He wants us to be rich and powerful, to enjoy and to celebrate the glories of his creation. Because he loves us he wants us to be free, and so he allows us also to go our own way. He even allows us to sin and to turn his paradise into a desert. Will we ever come back? He still loves—so much he loves the world that he gives his Son to us! Shall we accept him as our brother and learn from him to live as God's sons and daughters? He will never force us. His love is infinitely respectful. He does not display power, he only invites. He has placed our life into our own hands. This is his love. All those who share his final glory shall bear the mark of nobility and freedom.

So is also *Jesus' love*. It begins with the total abdication of all power: he empties himself. So he embarks on his mission of salvation. When he proclaims God's kingdom he has only truth and love on his side. He has no security of human resources; he has no earthly power.

So he deals with the disciples: he calls them, but they follow him in freedom. He would allow them to leave him. He does not prevent Judas from betraying him nor Peter from disowning him. He entrusts his entire mission to them—it is an incredible risk. It will be their task and responsibility. He loves and trusts them.

The final mark of his love for the disciples is the outpouring of the Holy Spirit; he will be their guidance and assurance in doubt and danger. Church structures will be there, authority and laws too. They are not meant to coerce or fetter the faithful but to channel and coordinate the life of the Spirit. Jesus himself, through the indwelling Spirit, will for ever be the strength, guidance and inspiration of his own, the guarantee that God's kingdom is coming.

This then is *God's love* revealed in Jesus Christ: God shares and communicates himself completely. He recognizes us, his creatures, in our freedom and he wishes us to grow and to become ever more ourselves. He trusts us in spite of our failures and he is waiting for us to be with him to share his eternal life in glory, face to face, in ineffable joy.

In Jesus also *our response* to God's love is revealed. He sums up the love to his Father in the word "Abba". This way of speaking to God is born of deep love, simple, unhindered. Love knows no 'problems', the kind of pre-occupations that isolate us from people, from God. Jesus has many questions, anxious questions; his life is full of obstacles and temptations, yet it remains always open before his Father, in thanks and praise for his life and mission. "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and understanding and have revealed them to children" (Mt 11,25). He trusts his Father: "Not one sparrow falls to the ground without your Father's will" (Mt 10,29), and he obeys God to the very end: "Not what I will but what you will" (Mt 14,36).

This, then, is authentic love: finding others, finding God by going out of ourselves, giving selflessly to the end, and thus finding ourselves, our true self in God.

The contemplation to attain divine love

All this is implied in the preliminary remarks which St. Ignatius puts in the beginning of the contemplation: that *love must show itself more in deeds, than in words, that love means sharing.*

We are asked to make this meditation not in the seclusion of a merely individual encounter with God but in the presence

of the angels and saints. This contemplation has a cosmic horizon, it concerns the whole of creation as it comes from God and is moving towards its divine destiny. This movement must be realized in human hearts, in *my heart*. So I pray for an intimate knowledge of all that I have received, a knowledge not at the brain level but the deep personal awareness of God's love. For once I should be gripped by the consciousness that my entire life has been embraced by love, from before I was conceived in the womb, yes, from the foundation of the world (Eph 1,4).

This contemplation is made in four stages. (1) I recall the blessings of *creation and redemption* and the special favours I have received. Let these graces pass through your mind as in a flash-back, the surroundings of your childhood, the people among whom your life developed. From your early age God has touched your heart in countless ways. Each person has his/her own history to remember, how our life took shape and matured through the years up to the present hour.

(2) The second stage of this contemplation leads us deeper: "*How God dwells in creatures*". In our human relations gifts are often a substitute for personal concern. We give something to a beggar to get rid of him. Even on a social level we fulfill obligations through a present but we have neither time nor interest to meet on a personal level. Real presents are valued not by their price in the bazaar but by the degree of personal concern expressed in them. The first drawing of a child presented to its mother would not fetch a high price, but the mother knows its preciousness; it comes from love.

In each one of God's gifts he himself is present to us: with the rays of the sun God touches my eyes; through the vibrations of the air he fills my life with sound and music. Most of all God is present in the movements of my spirit, my heart, in my growing understanding of life, world and people, in the awakening to my true value and destiny. With deep respect God allows me to build my life with my own mind and efforts, and in my growing vision, my courage, my joy of moving on and reaching out, God is present. He does not advertise himself. His apparent absence, his anonymity, is part of the delicacy of his divine love. So he finally makes

myself his temple. He wants to be present in me, and through me present to the world in which I live.

(3) In a third stage of this contemplation I see *God at work in all creatures*. The work of creation does not consist only in a single act of God in the inscrutable past; creation lasts as long as creatures exist. God sustains them, he is at work in them, with his creativity so that they grow and unfold in immense variety. God intends them to grow beyond themselves into ever new forms and perfections. He is creative also in my own growth. He is present and at work as my consciousness deepens and my horizons widen, as I find my identity and the meaning and mission of my life. In this contemplation we may become aware of the process of our growth in the past, in these Spiritual Exercises, in this very hour: of the moments of discovery, of "opened eyes", of a new readiness to go out in an ever new response to his call. God is at work around me, in me, through me.

(4) Finally, in the fourth stage of this contemplation on divine love, I pray to become aware of the richness and beauty which I encounter in my world, in my life. Each such experience is a *glimpse of the divine mystery*. You need not think of spectacular events—Jesus used to brush them aside—God's presence and reign are realized *in daily life*. Have you never met a man who faithfully stands for honesty and right in the midst of corruption and betrayal, and he suffers for it? What would we know of God's own faithfulness if we never encountered such people? A woman is left alone by her husband with no resources, and yet she cares for the children, silent, cheerful, patient, unaccusing, uncomplaining. This is an image of the self-gift with which Jesus gives himself for us in patience and concern. Have you never been touched by true love, when you felt fully accepted and supported, when you began to realize your own worth and what you could and should be? God has touched you through such love. He wants his love and beauty to flow through his creatures, so that in the millions of channels of human life he can meet and touch you, and give you a glimpse of what he is, and of what you are, and what you shall be in his glory: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2,9).

The prayer of surrender

Each of these four stages of the contemplation on divine love should be concluded with the prayer of surrender in which the movement of the Spiritual Exercises is summed up. Reflect on it word by word.

"Take and receive"

The answer to God's love consists in our own self-gift to him, in union with Jesus, the surrender to God our Father of whatever we are and have. This surrender is expressed through two verbs which must be understood in their distinct meaning: God "*takes*" what is his. Taking is the expression of sovereign power. So I pray now that God take what is *his*. I belong to him and have no claim to autonomy.

But God will never take possession of me *unless I freely* offer myself. Thus I add: "*receive*". We receive from others only what they freely give. My coming to God is the response of my freedom, and I ask him to receive what I give to him. In these two complementary words we express the act of our surrender to God: *Take what is yours, receive what is mine*. God has placed my life into my own hands so that I can give it to him.

"All my liberty"

We have a new understanding of the richness of this word. Man is the only creature who holds his life in his own hands. It is for us to give it its orientation. This is hard. It demands options which may be painful. Sartre once said that man is "condemned to freedom." We cannot live carefree and unconcerned, like animals; we must answer the question of our life's meaning and we must therefore make decisions. In Jesus Christ we have found an inner awareness of true life, to live it moving towards God. We have made this most basic of options. It is our human dignity that we are able to make it and so we pray: "Take all my liberty".

"My memory, my understanding and my entire will"

This is the ancient triad which makes up human existence. *Memory* is more than my remembrances. It is the totality of

influences which are stored in me and which make up my concrete existence. The atoms, which have a history of millions of years until now they form my body. The dawn of life on earth and the beginnings of the human family of which I am a member, I am one with all this, part of one living continuum linked inseparably with my ancestors. The combination of genes that finally gave shape to the uniqueness of my physical and psychic life is part of my memory, it is meant to be actuated in my life. Then comes my own life as it has developed under the complex influence of parents and family, of my social and economic surroundings, my education and the manifold experiences and challenges of my life. All these, and my reactions to them, constitute my true being. Most of it is submerged below the level of consciousness yet it actively influences me. This is my memory, what in this growing and evolving world I have become in unrepeatable uniqueness.

Animals too have "memory", but they have no *understanding*. In me all the treasures and legacies of the past can become conscious. They become my life with its burdens, opportunities, with its many challenging puzzles. Only in man can creation come to itself in lucidity because it becomes conscious and transparent to the divine mystery. In every person this consciousness is realized in a unique, unrepeatable way. Each person is God's image in a unique way and is meant to unfold it in his/her life. This is the task of our freedom, of our will.

To this life of mine I alone can give orientation. This is my *will*. I can choose to close in on myself and to manipulate things around me, and other people as well, all for my interests, or I can opt to open out to others, to God. It is for me to decide, my whole being is ambivalent. I contemplate my hand: it can be an instrument for taking, grabbing, keeping, beating; it is meant to be open, to give, share and bless. Every organ of my body can be used in opposite ways. My whole being can be directed either for self or for others, to God. The meaning of my existence is decided by my will.

"All that I have and possess, thou hast given to me, to thee, O Lord, I return it"

My self-gift to God is the full response to God's love.

Whatever I am is his gift to me, whatever I am is my gift to him.

“All is thine, dispose of it according to thy will”

It is the purpose of these Spiritual Exercises to grow beyond individual desires, to find God’s will and to realize it in my life, and in my mission.

“Give me thy love and thy grace, for this is sufficient for me”

We surely need many things in daily life for body and mind, and we trust that God will provide them. This is not my concern in this retreat. Daily necessities do not constitute my life. I need one thing: *God’s love*. The assurance that I am in his love, that, with Jesus, I can call him “Abba”, my Father. I need also *his grace*: God’s love must become real and active in my own heart and evoke a response. Only he can enable me to respond wholeheartedly to his love. This is grace, which enables me freely and joyfully to make my full self-gift to him. Give me thy love and thy grace.

SHORT POINTS FOR MEDITATION

1. *Love in Christian life* (1 Cor 13).

Read this canticle of love as addressed personally to you. It speaks in three paragraphs of the meaning and richness of Christian love.

- “If I have not loved, I am nothing”: love is the greatest of all charisms. Whatever our achievements, talents, graces, they all are empty unless they are inspired by love, to build up the body of Christ.
- “Love is patient and kind . . .”: this is how love looks in daily life. It is clothed in working-day-garments, with no glamour and little hope for social recognition. It is the hidden presence of God. It is the way in which God’s kingdom grows in our world.
- “Love never ends . . .”: Other gifts are bestowed on us for our earthly life. Love is the beginning of

eternity. Here on earth we begin to share in God's life that will fill our eternity.

2. *God is love* (1 Jn 4,7-21).

This is the ultimate message of the bible, summing up the mystery of salvation as the revelation of God's love and our response to it. Read this whole text with a meditative mind as a last message to you coming from the disciple whom Jesus loved.

— "He who loves is born of God and knows God": this is the ultimate mystery of God, that he is love. He shares his life in the eternal communication of Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He communicates his life to us in creation and salvation. If I begin to share in this mystery of love, I know God, I share in his life.

— "He who does not love does not know God, for God is love": he may know *about* God, but he does not know him, he is not in communion with God.

— "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son": all comes from God, all life and salvation is the revelation of his love. Our love is response to God's love, its realisation in our world.

— "If God so loved us we also ought to love one another": love of neighbour is the expansion of God's love in our world and society. God's love penetrates our world through the channels of human love. It is meant to permeate our society and to transform it into God's kingdom.

FURTHER READINGS:

- Mt 5, 43-48: Loving enemies.
- Mt 7, 1-5: Do not judge.
- Mt 18, 21-35: The parable of the unforgiving servant.
- James 2,14-26: Practical charity.

QUESTIONS:

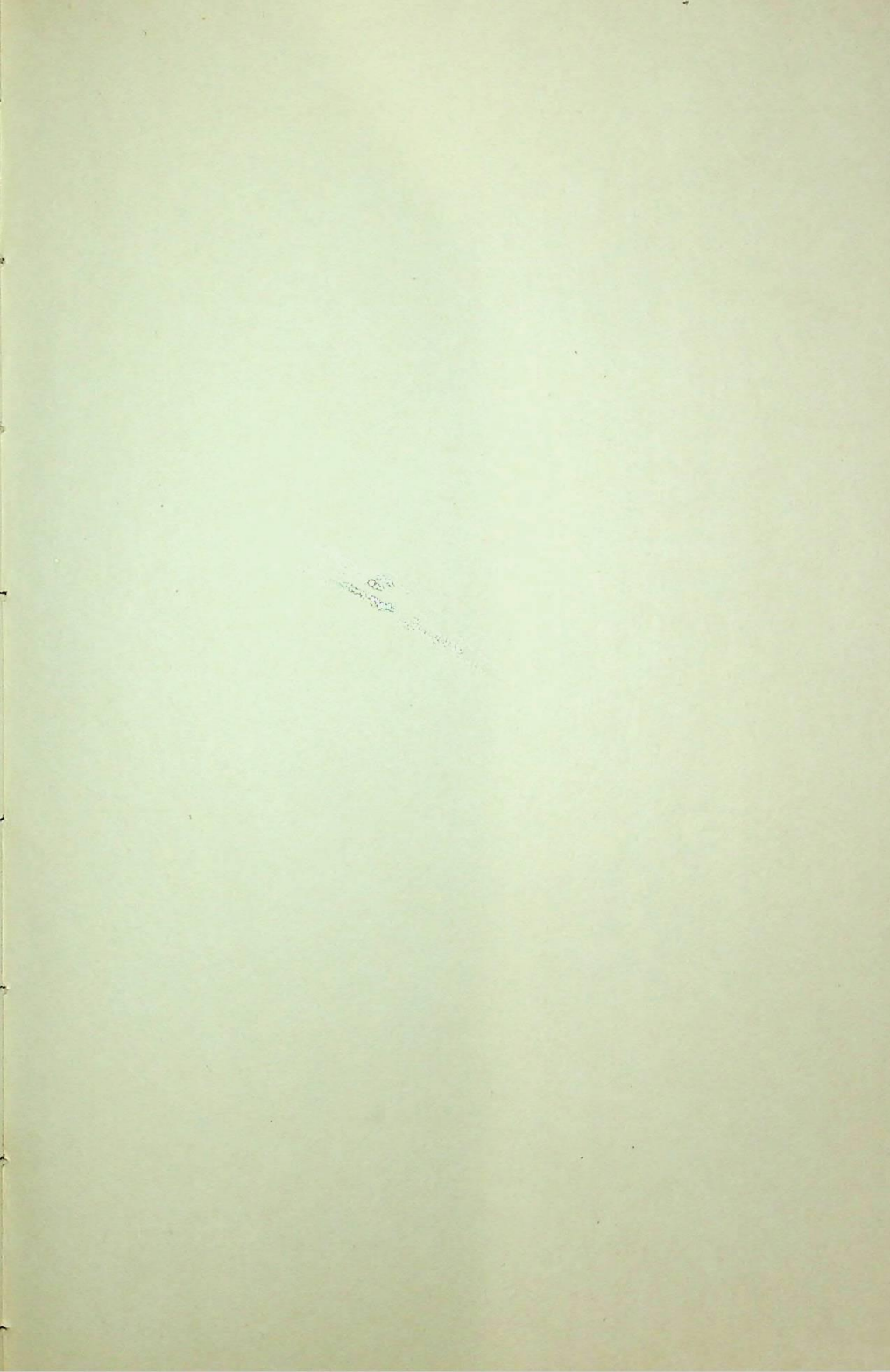
1. Am I able to see my life as a *dialogue of love*: God's love for me, my response to him?
2. Have I realised the practical implications of love of my neighbour in attitudes and thoughts, in speech, action, reaction?

FOR REFLECTION:

In this context Teilhard de Chardin speaks of the creative powers which God has bestowed on us to penetrate and build our world. But also the destructive powers of life and world lead to God; they empty our hearts for God's love:

"My God, I deliver myself up with utter abandon to those fearful forces of dissolution which, I blindly believe, will this day cause my narrow ego to be displaced by your divine presence. The man who is filled with an impassionate love for Jesus... he will awaken in the bosom of God."

(TEILHARD DE CHARDIN, *Hymn of the Universe*).



OTHER BOOKS ON THE SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

David L. Fleming, S.J., *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius A Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading.*

272 pages

The literal translation of the Ignatian text and the "contemporary reading" are given in opposite pages.

Parmananda R. Divarkar, S.J., *The Path of Interior Knowledge.*

166 pages

The seven sections of the book, move through the successive stages of the retreat with appropriate reflections on the Gospel as an aid to prayer.

Edouard Pousset, S.J., *Life in Faith and Freedom.*

235 pages

An essential book for those wishing to have a thorough knowledge of the Spiritual Exercises.

Jules J. Toner, S.J., *A Commentary on St. Ignatius' Rules for the Discernment of Spirits.*

350 pages

A book that will be especially helpful to directors of retreats, retreatants, superiors, spiritual counsellors and students of spiritual theology.

David M. Stanley, S.J., *I Encountered God! The Spiritual Exercises with the Gospel of St. John.*

344 pages

The author presents up-to-date biblical theology oriented towards the heart. It is intended to open the way to affective prayer and contemplation.

Giles Cusson, S.J., *Biblical Theology and the Spiritual Exercises.*

400 pages

This book is, in many respects, the most extensive and best-documented commentary on the Exercises presently available in English. It bases its interpretation of St. Ignatius' Exercises chiefly on the Biblical Experience of Salvation.



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